Games / Anime / Multimedia

play

Wii COVER DOUBLE-FEATURE! DEATH JR. & OKAMI!

SUPER DOUBLE-POSTER ISSUE!

VIKING: BATTLE OF ASGARD
THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU
SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL
DAMNATION
FABLE 2
IRON MAN
DISGAEA PS3
GTA IV

Death Jr.

Wow-Wii! Death Jr. gets all "next-gen" on the Wii!

April 2008

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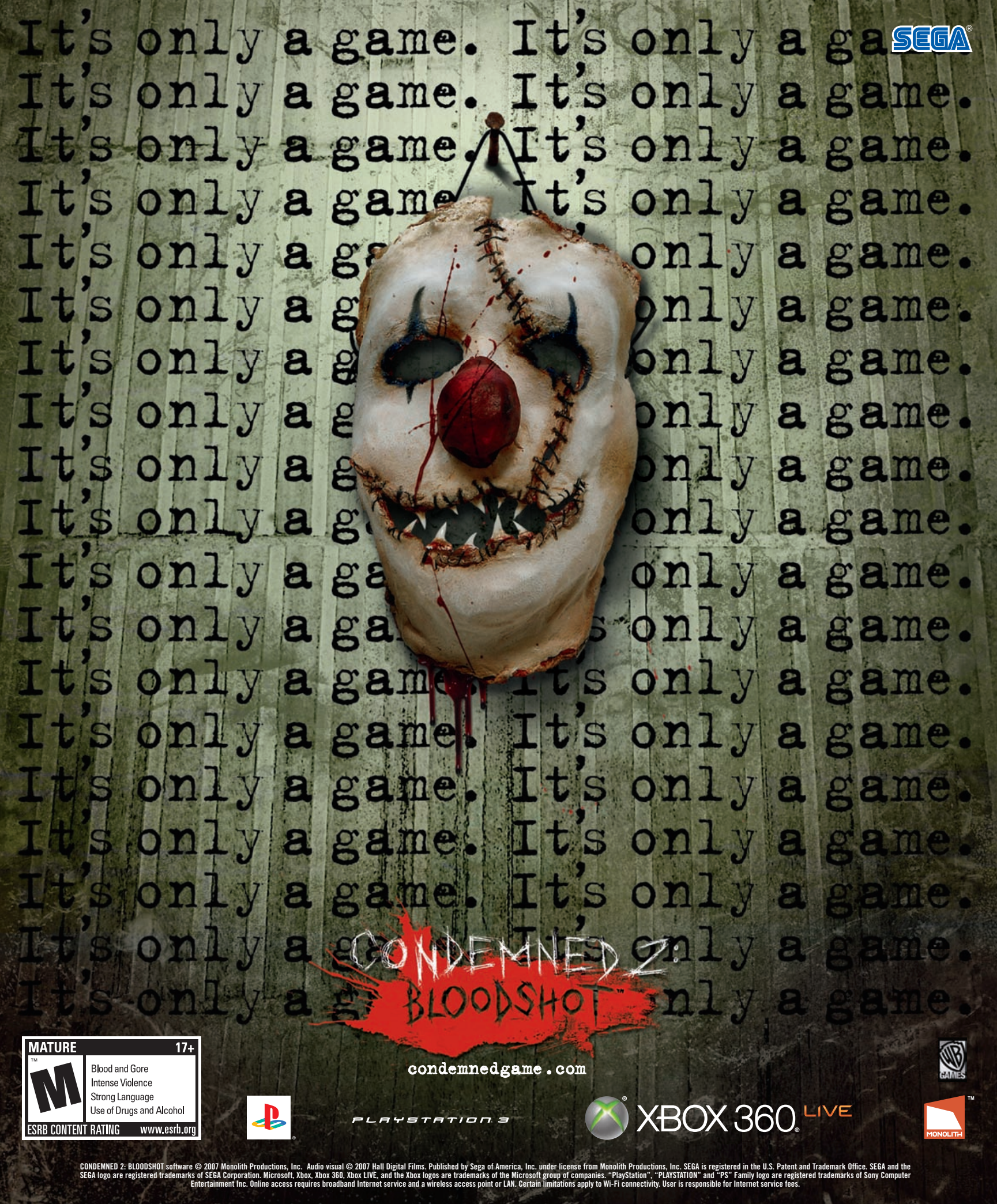
Cover 1 of 2



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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

76

Now you see me...

Back in the Summer of 1991, sitting in the bullpen of my import game retail/mail order store DieHard Game Club, it dawned on me that man could not live on EGM alone; besides, I was going broke buying all those four-page ads. With the import video game trade busting at the seams and so few options for die-hard gamers, I decided to transform our pocket-size catalog, DieHard GameFan, into a fully fledged magazine. And so with a rag-tag band of customers and employees and the world's oldest living Mac, GameFan was born. I've been producing a monthly video game magazine every 3.5 weeks—save for a wee sabbatical in between GameFan and Gamers' Republic, but that's a story for another time—ever since. I've witnessed the industry completely transform, blossoming from a misunderstood niche to America's pastime and worked month in and month out, year after year with some of the most special people you can imagine. Say what you will about gaming but the core of this industry, from the developers to the amazing PR people, are like no others.

Anyway...I'm not dying or leaving or anything like that—sorry, got carried away there for a second—but this is my last issue as Editor in Chief of Play. I'm promoting myself to Publisher/Creative Director so that I can pursue growing the Play, Geek, Girls of Gaming, and Play Japan brands; finally try my hand at manga (yes, I have two in the works) and spend more time doing feature work in addition to my infamous "Dave game" reviews. I'll be working on the site as well and training my kids to kick your butt on PSN and XBLA. It's been a great run spending half of my life putting issues together but it's time for some new blood, or in the case of the print magazine business, fresh meat. So I give you my dear friend Brady Fiechter. If I didn't have someone like Brady to take the reins I'd never consider this but, like me, for better or for worse, Brady has something to say and finds the status-quo as unexciting as I do. And so, if you want to hear me rant check the Back of the Book every now and then, otherwise just look for the really high scores…and there I'll be.

To every last reader that's been with me since the beginning or joined the crusade in progress whether by my side or giving me hell, all I can say is thank you from the bottom of my heart. I've only done this for you—for people as passionate about video games as I am. You can still email me anytime and sooner or later I'll always still reply. Over and out.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

Editorial

Editor In Chief **Dave Halverson**
Executive Editor **Brady Fiechter**
Senior Editors **Greg Orlando, Casey Loe**
Associate Editors **Heather Campbell, Eric Patterson**
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PC Editor **Mike Griffin**
Japanese Correspondents **Nick Des Barres, Dai Kohama**
Copy Editor **Daniel Campisi**
Original art by **Dany Orizio**

Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher **Michael Eisenberg**
Account Executive **Cassandra Musburger**
cmusburger@geekmonthly.com
Tel (818) 707-7786 x105
Contact **Michael Eisenberg**
sales@playmagazine.com
Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102
Fax 818.707.7212\

play magazine online

Online Content Manager **Eric Patterson**
webmaster@playmagazine.com

Corporate

Director Of Operations **Julie Halverson**
jhalverson@playmagazine.com
818.707.7786 ext.104

VP of Sales & Marketing **Michael Eisenberg**
meisenberg@playmagazine.com

Administrative Assistant **Daniel Campisi**
dcampisi@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions and Customer Service
(in U.S.) 800-694-6506
(outside U.S.) 818-487-2036
email: play@espcomp.com

play magazine Offices
Fusion Publishing, Inc.
29229 Canwood St., Suite 200
Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

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April 2008

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playback

April 2008

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Wii-Waggler

Regarding complaints about the sh***y Wiimote waggling games, while I agree with these complaints on a certain level, I was wondering if the lackluster games are more of an indication of lazy development, rather than insufficiencies in the Wii itself. I would *hope* that the remote and nunchuck can in fact handle complex motions, rather than just point and flick. What are your professional opinions? A game like Zack & Wiki is just the tip of the berg of great Wii exclusives, right? You think developers and Nintendo themselves will bring on the gold? Personally one thing I'd like to see is a 1st person Zelda adventure, one that plays like Metroid Prime and Elder Scrolls, with 1-to-1 sword and weaponry controlling. And Dave, you and me both: P.N. 03 was the shit, imagine a Wii sequel where the dancy combat is motion controlled; Vanessa's hands mimicking your own hand movements?!
Also, while I can appreciate your Girls of Gaming mag, how about throwing a "bon" for us gay gamers? Like a pamphlet or something of sexified guy characters or gay moments in gaming (I'm well aware of those Japanese "shooters" with naked guys all over the place). Hell, I'll be happy with a calendar of the Play staff in their undies. Seriously.

Thanks again for being the best magazine ever. Peace! John

We the People

I am responding to the Back of the Book section in the March 2008 issue. It seems some of these politicians still don't understand video games, which is even more reason for me to consider not voting for them. Romney (who is no longer in the running) wants to protect children from "filth, pornography, violence, sex, and perversion." Now, some of my friends and I (as children in the past) have been exposed to some of those things and we turned out ok. The fact that he is talking about video games means those aspects are fictional, therefore if one was raised to distinguish between fiction and reality, they should be alright (just like myself and many of my friends). Video games were not as advanced when I was a child, but I was still exposed to some of those societal aspects through other avenues and became a responsible adult. Clinton (the female one) responded to Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas concerning children coming into contact with the hidden content. Now, children shouldn't be playing that game in the first place because the box clearly states that it is for mature audiences only (I would imagine 17 and above). Is being exposed to that hidden content at 17 really that different from being exposed to it at 18 (where apparently the content would have been legal had it been disclosed)? I can tell you that I have been exposed to worse (as far as viewing the content in everyday life) well before the age of 17 and yet, I became a responsible adult. Obama wanted the video game industry to make the descriptions on the boxes of video games (relating to what content is inside the game) more clear. I don't see how they could be any clearer. All one has to do is look in the corners on the back side of the box (in most cases) to see what is needed to make a purchasing decision. If

> "It seems some of these politicians still don't understand video games, which is even more reason for me to consider not voting for them."

I was a politician (not that I plan to be), I would start by trying to understand gamers before asking those same gamers (well, the ones who are allowed to vote anyway) to vote for me. Hopefully a politician someday will have had played video games in their past and understand where I (and many others) are coming from. That video game content (hidden or not) does not cause all of us to act in a similar way in real life. Usually video games are meant as an escape from everyday life or a means to try something we aren't allowed to do (or aren't able to do) in real life. They also serve the purpose of allowing us to have fun, whether we are children or hopefully responsible adults.

Collin G.

Welcome to the world of 3DO

I really enjoy your magazine, especially how you combine it with Japanese Anime reviews. I have been a subscriber in the past but still buy it off the shelf since I have been/will be moving around a lot. I was wondering, on behalf of the gamers who enjoy not only the next-gen systems but the systems that helped get video gaming to where its at now, the Sega Saturn and Sega Dreamcast and the Sony Playstation, could you please start an article or column that maybe gives the top ten games or maybe the top 2 of each genre of a particular system. For example, I have recently purchased a Panasonic 3DO system off Ebay and I do not know what games to buy for it. Which games were popular and which games had the highest review scores? It doesn't have to be anything in-depth, just something to acknowledge that the older systems are still alive and still fun to play. Thanks for your time.

Craig K., SSgt, USAF
Osan AB, Republic Of Korea

Send in the clones

(Regarding all of the internet babble on game scores etc.)…I feel that games aren't meant to be that serious, since they're games, but yeah. I mean, I think with the internet there's a kind of collusion of interests here, where the game media resembles every other kind of media. I mean journalism and news media... and something about how you can click around so fast and read any other version of a review, news item, article, whatever, from other competing websites... it all runs together and the whole "community" of the internet just starts to sound the same. It's like the internet is all one place despite so MANY people being on it. So I don't just mean video games. It's bothered me for a long time how the culture at large, in America or the English-speaking world, seems to be so similar everywhere... first it was radio and TV and the internet has just really made things worse. It's supposedly wonderful, but i wish there was more like localized culture, but i don't know how that could ever be now, even if we were to develop local, small-time closed-off internets, closed-off from the Big Internet (this place)... I just remember for instance that GameFan, early GameFan at least, felt strangely disconnected from the rest of the publications, and yes Play Magazine does that too (and Gamer's Republic did it less), but still... I mean, I don't mean to dehumanize the guys that work for ___.com, ___.com... I watched for instance their videos, of getting a Wii that special night like a year ago, they each put up videos of how their offices got the Wii and showed them opening it, and the guys at ____ cuss a lot, and the guys at ____ don't, etc., but basically I just felt they were all the same people.

Matt D.

The Motorstorm never stops!

Just wanted to let you know you nailed it on MotorStorm. I never thought I'd like another racing game as much as NFS-Most Wanted and Burnout Revenge but MotorStorm is making a run in my book. It's hands-down the best looking racer I've ever seen – it may be the best looking game I've ever seen and I'm only pushing it out at 1080i. The amount of on screen action is simply amazing. Havok rocks the in-race crash replays. And I love the linear aspect of it, race, win and progress, no wandering, no open world, no wasted time.

I only get to play for about an hour a day, I just don't have time to cruise around aimlessly. IMO, Criterion ruined Burnout Paradise going open-world, at least give me the option to go open-world or linear – a la Most Wanted.
And what happened to Crash mode? Why are the breathtaking replays so short? Why can't I tell where the hell I'm supposed to race to? Why can't I restart a race? Why do I have to finish a race when I've obviously lost? Why do I have to use certain cars for certain races? I digress. Would love to hear they are working on a MotorStorm sequel. All it needs is a replay function and it would be an 11 in my book. It's a 10 as is. Can't see why it hasn't been a system seller.

Terry D.

NPD Group

database

Top Selling Console Hardware (Jan. 2008)

The console race is heating up on the heels of the Blu-ray vs. HD DVD fallout. It's anyone's race as 2008 gets underway.

Wii	274,000
PS3	269,000
Xbox 360	230,000

Top Selling Software January 2008

Call of Duty and Anything packing a guitar continues to soar.

January 2008

01	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare Xbox 360 Activision	330k
02	Wii Play w/remote Wii NOA	298k
03	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/wireless guitar Wii Activision	239k
04	Rock Band Special Edition Bundle Xbox 360 EA	183k
05	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock w/wireless guitar Xbox 360 Activision	182k
06	Super Mario Galaxy Wii NOA	172k
07	Burnout Paradise Xbox 360 EA	144k
08	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare PS3 Activision	140k
09	Mario Party DS NOA	138k
10	Mario & Sonic Olympic Games DS Sega	133k

COD 4 guy to Mr. Halverson: "Read 'em and weep moron."
Halverson to COD 4 guy: "You're about to get Super Smashed brother."
"Oh, hey, look down, Private... Nice feet!"

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Gears of War 2

Oil up your chainsaw, the Locust Horde are back

Details are sketchy behind the recently announced news that Gears of War 2 is indeed deep in development (you're surprised?), heading exclusively (you're surprised?) to an Xbox 360 near you. One thing we know with absolute certainty: the chainsaw gun is back, and the chainsaw gun will once again brutally rock. Word on the street is that this sequel will be even more "badass," with Marcus Fenix and his Delta Squad continuing the fight against the Locust Horde; Epic showed off new Unreal engine technology that enabled the rendering of hundreds of the horde enemies on screen at one time. Lead designer Cliffy B—thank his love for survival horror and tactical shooters as a big reason you're getting Gears 2—is still the man in charge on this sequel, but don't expect much in the way of juicy news just yet. His unveiling of the game left the trailer do all the talking, and talk it did as chainsaw dueling faded out with plenty of chunky flying bloody parts.

The Dishwasher

Does this look like a plate cleaning simulator to you?

Microsoft deserves mad respect for promoting the indie developer with its XNA platform, but if the industry isn't careful, these small-scale, freshly honed talents are gonna start stealing the show and prove that big-budget epic titles are so yesterday. Ok, so let's not get too dramatic here, but it's really starting to get interesting out there in the indie front, with more and more interesting titles cropping up, hinting at some truly new ground in game development and, ultimately, a resurgence in classic mechanics and simpler, more minimalistic approaches to design.

At GDC this year, Microsoft had an impressive display of XNA titles, promising a year to come of rich content. At

the top of the list is the award-winning The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai, a bloody and vibrant side-scroller set to release at the end of the year on Live Arcade. The game has you taking control of a little samurai-looking dude (once a dishwasher) with a rather sharp assortment of killing devices.

Developed by James E. Silva—coding, assets, sound, the whole thing—the game is a throwback to not only the style of the oldschool greats but the spirit in which games used to be made. Part of Silva's inspiration for The Dishwasher was his personal time spent working in a restaurant kitchen through college. His vision got a lot of people talking at GDC, and Microsoft even invited him onstage during their keynote.

Said Silva on his blog, amused by his recent press: "I live in a freezing apartment in upstate NY. Rent is $750 a month. I buy groceries at Wal-Mart. I buy clothes at Target. I drive a 1994 Honda Accord that was a hand-me-down from my sister..."

World Gaming League

You bet your ass!

Is there anything better than winning a game online and scoffing at the pathetic losers in your line of fire? There is: it's winning a game online and scoffing at the pathetic losers in your line of fire and also taking their money. If gambling for dollars while you showcase your gaming skills sounds like a good time, you should take a look at World Gaming (worldgaming.com), launching in mid-April and open to anyone who is willing to put their skills (and cash) to the test. As a community site for console gamers, World Gaming also provides an extensive array of networking opportunities. Obviously you want to know what you're up against and let people clearly see your own track record, so World Gaming will offer an exhaustive list of rankings and profiling. Not sure if you're quite ready and need to test the waters? A training area will also help ease into money matches.

A thousand years of memories lost. It's time to discover them.

From the famed creator of Final Fantasy, *Hironobu Sakaguchi, comes a revolutionary RPG experience rich in depth, emotion, and cinematic gameplay. In an age that has harnessed the dark power of magic, you are the mysterious, immortal Kaim—on a quest to reclaim 1,000 years of lost memories. Unlock a past infused with love, betrayal, and war to reveal the path to reclaim your life and rescue the world.*

TEEN
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Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol
Violence
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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE

Death Jr.

Root of Evil

Don't fear the reaper…well, maybe a little

words Dave Halverson

"...not only is über platforming in store, rife with baroque humor and the single most twisted cast of kooks in the gaming universe, but it's coming our way with the kind of wicked visuals we all signed up for."

It's good to know that after all these years cranking out video game magazines (15 and counting to be exact) that I can still be surprised. It all began back in December when, during a trip to Eidos, I fell in love with a new IP (which I can't mention) and elected to do the exclusive reveal cover for this April issue. Happy days. Fast forward to early February—about the time we'd be flying out to see the game—and the proverbial rug gets yanked out from under us. The game in question is building such a head of steam internally that Eidos (wisely) decides to pull back and groom it for the full-on multimedia treatment. Great news for the game…not so much for Play. A few hours later, just as I'm hanging up the phone with Capcom, stoked to land the review cover for Okami—I get a call from Eidos…"Have you ever heard of Death Jr.?" At first I thought they were joking (and a cruel joke at that), but as fate would have it they were dead (hehe) serious: "…because we just picked up Death Jr. for the Wii."

…I digress. I love Death Jr. but I've always thought that he belonged on the Wii. As I was sitting at Backbone doing the Root of Evil PSP cover story I was dropping hints about how cool it would be on the Wii. I mean, DJ on PSP is great, but the game belongs on console. Fate had intervened.

There was only one problem. Knowing that DJ was coming to the Wii, the anticipation would give me an ulcer. "How far along is it?" I asked…"Oh, it's pretty much done." Now is the time on Sprockets vhen ve dance! They managed to rebuild Death Jr. II Root of Evil from the ground up and keep me in the dark…and it's not like I didn't run the usual recon. Long story short, these are the kinds of moments that make it all worthwhile.

Right about now most of you (who don't have Wiimote calluses) are probably saying, "Big deal…" And you couldn't be any more on the money. It is a big deal, a huge deal even, because Backbone has so painstakingly "ported" the game over to Wii that it barely resembles the PSP game, which was great in its own right. Superb character models, re-balanced and paced levels, pseudo bump mapping, shiny reflections, particle effects, dynamic lighting…Root of Evil on Wii is second only to Super Mario Galaxy visually, and that can be argued. So not only is über platforming in store, rife with baroque humor and the single most twisted cast of kooks in the gaming universe, but it's coming our way with the kind of wicked visuals we all signed up for—a big bright shining star in the Wii universe.

Our adventure begins with DJ and Pandora exploring the forest outside of suburbia, searching for cocoons for their biology final. When they spot the mother of all pods, it's a race to hack it down—a race that ends up with the cocoon plummeting to the ground revealing the teenage girl inside who purchased a monster transformation kit with the promise of transforming her into hell's version of the Jolly Green Giant (only without the jolly). Thanks to DJ and Pandora, however, all she is green…and extremely pissed off. Using her newfound control over foliage, she wastes little time incapacitating the only power that can stop her (DJ's dad) and so off they go to save the day.

More so on Wii than PSP, the second

This is your Wii on Backbone.

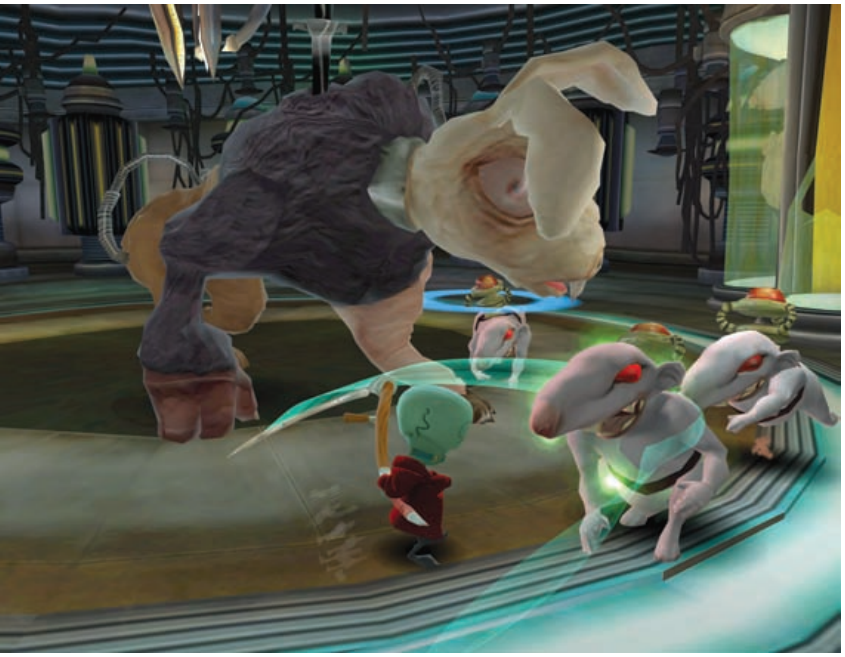
you take control of DJ you know that you're in for something special. The bounce in his stride, the animation, the attacks…the connection between player and character is instant and totally congruous; same for Pandora should you choose to embark on a split screen 2 player game in which both players are given complete freedom—I know; we're not worthy. Anyway, choose DJ…

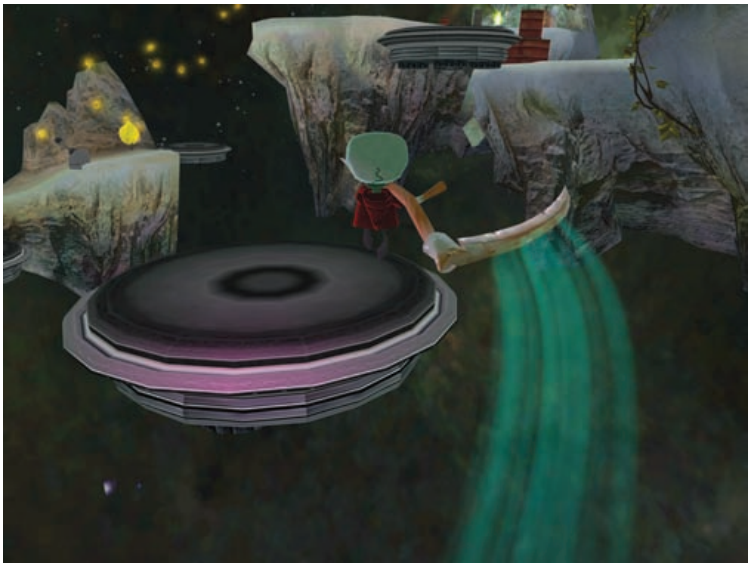
The crux of Root of Evil is a seamless transition between third-person shooting—pointing the Wiimote at the screen while strafing with the Nunchuk and shooting your arse off—and scythe play using DJ's trusty blade for melee and platforming purposes—rafter and hook swings, wire slides, ledge grabs, hover gliding… Backbone run the platforming gamut, intertwined with some of the best third-person shooting you've ever have the pleasure of discharging. As the game rolls on acquired parts can be found (exploration is highly recommended) and given to the series' malformed (but highly intelligent) conjoined twins Smith and Weston for future fabrication. You don't want to get caught in the game's later levels without maxed twin pistols, a tommy gun, electric gun, flamethrower, rocket launcher, shotgun, the infamous toilet-pare launcher and crowd-favorite C4 hamsters. Whether you're battling rabid giant mutant vermin, killer toys or reanimated trees, you'll need all the firepower you can get. Discharge your weapons wisely too; ammo is generously scattered throughout but limited to rounds on hand. The folks at Backbone have been kind enough to dump a generous stockpile of ammo around each boss, so fire at will when you're up against the big unruly and, for the most part, disgusting stuff. Getting there is more fun than a barrel of Chinpokomon, but the folks at backbone never disappoint at the end of the road.

And the whole creepy enchilada controls like a dream. Backbone's Wiimote wizard has wisely resisted the urge to make us cast the scythe like we're fly fishing, opting instead for a more streamlined split controller approach reserving Wiimote maneuvers to special moves that can be performed with a flick of the wrist. Elsewhere the transition between shooting and action is seamless along with centering and moving around the camera. The game just feels so right… you'll see.

I could ramble on, cackling about super-cool scenarios and crazy bits of platforming antics (beware killer waffle houses), but I'd rather leave you with this simple statement: If you have a Wii you need this game. Last year's PS2 depository is this year's fresh maker. System-exclusives like this are what built Nintendo. It's nice to see that the empire is still under construction.

Ectoplasm stains are nasty business.





Death Jr. Root of Evil	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Backbone Entertainment
Publisher	Eidos
Available	May

Interview ▸

"...the whole creepy enchilada controls like a dream. Backbone's Wiimote wizard has wisely resisted the urge to make us cast the scythe like we're fly fishing..."

Interview

A visit with Backbone Studios; a great place to visit, and they live there.

Team Members answering are as follows:
Mike Mika, Studio Head, Backbone Entertainment Emeryville, DJ co-creator
Micah Russo, Creative Director, DJ co-creator
Norm Badillo, Art Director
James Stanley, Producer

play: I'm among DJ's biggest fans (and I've been sniffing around), yet I didn't get word of RoE for Wii until it was done! That's rare in this business. How and why did you keep such a tight lid on things? Was the idea to build it and then present a finished product to attract a publisher, or has Eidos been on board from the start? (The anticipation would have killed me, so thanks.)
Mike Mika: When we finished RoE on PSP, we had just begun to develop our internal Wii technology. What better way to test out that technology than to port over our game. Not knowing how quickly we'd move onto Wii, we had a small team begin the process. Initially, it was going to be just an exercise. But when we thought about adapting the controls for the game, we got pretty excited; there were just some things we weren't going to solve on the PSP and the Wii interface was the answer. Playing the first few builds got us excited all over again and now here we are. We were presented with an unusual circumstance: we could actually take direct feedback from the PSP game and improve the game for Wii, for a whole new audience.

Root of Evil plays like it was born for the Wii. Did you have it in the back of your mind during initial development?
Micah Russo: We always approach every title with single-minded focus on the target platform. So RoE for PSP was designed for the PSP. That said, at it's core the Death Jr. franchise has always been about the seamless mixture of shooting and platforming, and that gameplay was always a bit of a struggle to execute on the PSP. I think too the easy accessibility of the Wii has a similar draw as the easy appeal of Death Jr. So in some ways, I think you can say the Wii was born for Death Jr.

Although the layout is the same there has been substantial tweaking: The group send-off into the overhauled training level; the new field manual/ Smith and Weston upgrades and so on. Did any of this come from user input? The game flow is substantially improved.
Micah: As part of our post-production on the original RoE we made a "Review Matrix" that listed all of the game features of the PSP version along with color-coded comments (good, bad, or indifferent) from the reviews. So when we started RoE for Wii, we took out that Review Matrix, read through the forums, and related all

"There's no cookie cutter formula to roll out a port, at least not for us. In our case, all the assets were redone for the Wii..."

of our personal experiences sharing the game with friends and family. When we put all that out on the table it was pretty easy to see what needed some work. One of the major things that came to light was the need to make RoE cleaner and less complicated for new players to get into—hence the revised training levels and the new field manual.

How does a port like this work? Did you essentially paint on the same canvas, or are parts of the environments remodeled?

Micah: As you mentioned above, one of our primary goals was to improve gameplay pacing and flow. One of the early things we did was map out all of the gameplay mechanics again. For example, where are rafter swings introduced and where do we use them? How do we make that better? Once we had that roadmap down, we targeted areas to redesign to help with gameplay flow and pacing. We tried to minimize the impact of these redesigns as much as possible, but in a lot of cases making those changes meant tearing down geometry and rebuilding it from scratch. It hurt a bit, but the rest of the team was really supportive and it shows. I think we made a lot more changes in the end than we would have guessed at the start.

James Stanley: There's no cookie cutter formula to roll out a port, at least not for us. In our case, all the assets were redone for the Wii while utilizing the PSP as the blueprint to work from. "Ports" often get a bad rap and to a large degree it's because people don't understand the development process and the costs involved. It makes a lot of sense to port from handheld systems to the Wii because of the lower costs and comparable assets especially in the case of the PSP. We'd received good ratings on the second PSP title but were disappointed it didn't reach a larger audience. With the Wii & Eidos' interest in the Death Jr. franchise, we have the ability to reach out to not only hardcore gamers but more casual gamers as well.

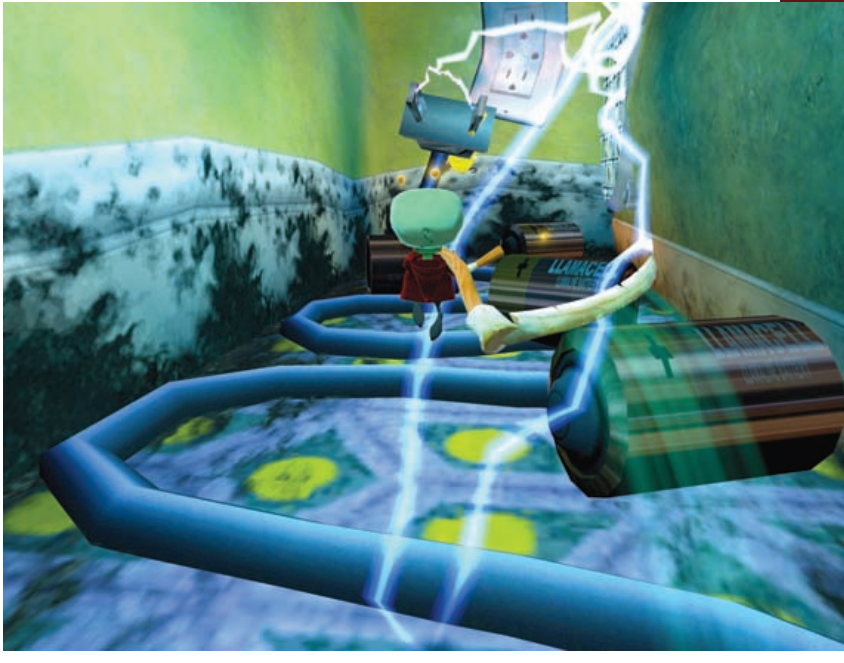
Norm Badillo: The steps we took with the environments were to up-res the textures, refine, build, and add geometry afterwards. We wanted to evolve the art, as the tech evolved, in order to keep the game and gameplay intact, so everything was tackled in steps, once we knew what our initial baseline was.

The enemy characters had to be completely rebuilt. Some of them retained their look from the PSP version, and some are completely revisioned. DJ and the gang were all remade, to match their pre-rendered movie counterparts. The Wii definitely gave us a lot of room to make this happen.

Are there any disadvantages in porting from a mobile app? Is it in any way a detriment working from an existing template when it comes to tapping a console's potential? Sure wouldn't seem so.

Micah: On the design side, I think mobile app templates translate a lot easier to the console than vice versa. In the mobile world, you're really concerned about

"As you might imagine, we started off with all sorts of crazy notions of swinging the Wii Remote around like a windmill..."



keeping play times meaningful over short intervals, avoiding pick-up and forget, and keeping design decisions smaller and cleaner to match the hardware's performance. It's a lot easier to upscale those decisions and keep the integrity of the design intact. The main danger is suddenly getting greedy with what the console can do. If we'd gone crazy with Wii Remote control, for example, that'd be an example of that bad designer greed.
Mike: Visually, you could get away with a certain lack of detail on the PSP. When we first got the game running, it looked much better than we thought, but things like text, texture and model detail—it just wasn't going to cut it. So we set out to re-master all of the assets in the game. We were very aware of the reputation that ports get, so we didn't want to sell out and go down the easy road. I hope people appreciate the effort, and judge the game for what it is, not where it came from.

The ersatz normal/bump mapping is especially cool. You even manage to give it that layer of sheen/glaze. I really love the chrome finish on DJs guns too. Very few Wii games—actually Mario Galaxy is the only one that comes to mind—boast this level of texture mapping. Is it difficult to achieve on Wii

"Performance-wise, there is a lot of untapped potential still in the system. Games like Mario Galaxy sure do re-enforce this point."

When giant baby heads attack... Run DJ, run!

for some reason?
Norm: The shaders for the Wii are very specific to the Wii and its graphic hardware. Our engineers worked really hard to ensure that the process was as easy as it could possibly be. The shaders being tied to the hardware could not be previewed in Maya, or emulated on the PC. The art staff had to tweak the shaders specifically on the Wii hardware to make it look right.
Many people have this misconception that the Wii is not capable of complex shaders. In actuality, the Wii is able to simulate many shaders that can be found on the more robust systems, if the hardware is utilized correctly. The list of some of the shaders that we used on the Wii were:
Rim light: Simulates a nice rim light around characters and objects to give it that extra level of detail. We mainly used this on the characters and enemies. This really gave them a look similar to our pre-rendered movies, which made the game consistent over-all.
Emboss bump shader: Simulates bump mapping on the Wii. We used this shader on a lot of the props, environments and characters.
Terrain shader: Blends four maps together through an RGB channel. We used this shader on many of our organic environments. We were able to reduce tiling this way in our environments, and really give our levels a lived-in feel.

What about the characters themselves? How many additional polys are we looking at for DJ and Pandora? And does that go for the enemies too?
Norm: The original DJ was 700 tri's, the new DJ is 7000, Pandora is the same. We raised the polygon counts 10x and also redid the skeletal rigs to match with the higher counts. All the enemies have had a similar treatment. We really wanted to visually enhance the game.

Has the animation changed? The new bigger characters seem a bit more fluid.
Norm: The smaller character animation held up from the PSP with some tweaks. The bigger characters needed more work, because of the adjustments that were made with the rigs.

How long did the transition to Wii take? All the same team members or have you added to the roster? You guys seem to be growing.
Mike: Pretty much the same group moved onto the Wii. I'm sure they're eager to get a well-deserved break! It can be challenging being on the same game for so long. We are definitely growing. We have a lot more going on in the studio than we did when we first created Death, Jr. You'll soon see the results of all that growth this year.

Did taking the multiplayer from two individual screens to a single split screen pose much of a challenge?
Micah: Obviously the LAN networking tech hurdle is pretty huge, but in a lot of ways having two individual screens was really nice. Each player can have their own HUD, dialog text, sounds, etc. without competing for screen real estate. Getting the UI fixed up for two people was one of the bigger tasks – especially for things like dialogue and camera cuts that had been independent in the PSP version. We also had to spend a little bit of time figuring out what to do with the Wii Remote aiming in split screen but that wound up being pretty easy in the end.
Mike: The biggest challenge was having someone sitting right next to you in front of the TV within "punching" range.

Regarding Wii development: aside from a few system-exclusive third-party titles (like DJ) and first-part Nintendo games—the bulk of the games make the console seem grossly underpowered; closer to the PS2 spec than, say, the original Xbox. Where does it fall? Is it an unruly console to develop for like the old Saturn?
Mike: You know what, it's far better than people give it credit for. By the end of Death, Jr., we felt we could do even more than what we could achieve with it the first time out. A lot of cool effects and features came on-line just a little too late for the game, and we're eager to use them. Performance-wise, there is a lot of untapped potential still in the system. Games like Mario Galaxy sure do re-enforce this point. Some of the models and effects that our artists are doing on the

platform are pretty amazing, the sorts of things I never expected the system to be capable of.

I was so afraid of having to make casting motions to latch onto hooks and wires, etc. But you've wisely limited waggling to ancillary scythe moves and introduced an intuitive control system with a seamless transition between shooting and melee. Was there a lot of back and forth over how much Wii Remote waving would be involved?
Micah: As you might imagine, we started off with all sorts of crazy notions of swinging the Wii Remote around like a windmill, and of course who doesn't want to chuck C4 Hamsters like grenades? After playing a lot of Wii games and getting a lot of ideas and thoughts from the team (luckily we had a lot of wise team members that didn't want to get carpal tunnel from wagging the Wii Remote all day long), the leads locked themselves in the proverbial room and spent the "afternoon" pantomiming their way through the list. We kept the mantra of seamless shooting and platforming (melee), and at the end of the day it was pretty clear that less was more in this case. It's not to say it was perfect off the bat, but we did a lot of fine tuning on the melee controls and we were able to eliminate a lot of distractions (like grenade tossing) from the get-go.

"I wish I could disclose the kind of people who have approached us about the movie, it's really very humbling."

Those better be some great waffles.

It's been a while since I played the PSP version. I don't remember it being this funny. Did Seep say stuff like "suck my cork" in the original Root or did you re-record some dialogue?
Micah: Most of the humor came from the PSP version; the cinematic dialogue hasn't changed at all. We were able to record some new in-game dialogue for DJ, Pandora, and Smith and Weston and rescue some other gems that were left on the cutting room floor. With the additions, we primarily tried to fill in some story gaps and work on pacing and comedic timing. And for the record, Seep did have that line in the original Root…it's one of my personal faves.

It's a great cast. The DJ and Pandora voices are spot-on for their alter egos. Has there been any further talk about an anime? Given the Wii's numbers coupled with the excellence of this game it would seem almost a foregone conclusion that DJ makes his way onto TV somehow.
Mike: It seems like we always evade this question every time it is asked. While we would love to say we have a TV show or movie in the works, and we've come pretty close, there were just a lot of factors that have slowed it down. It's still up in the

air, and the fan base has been very vocal about it. I wish I could disclose the kind of people who have approached us about the movie, it's really very humbling. Some of our biggest fans are animation and film heroes of our own.

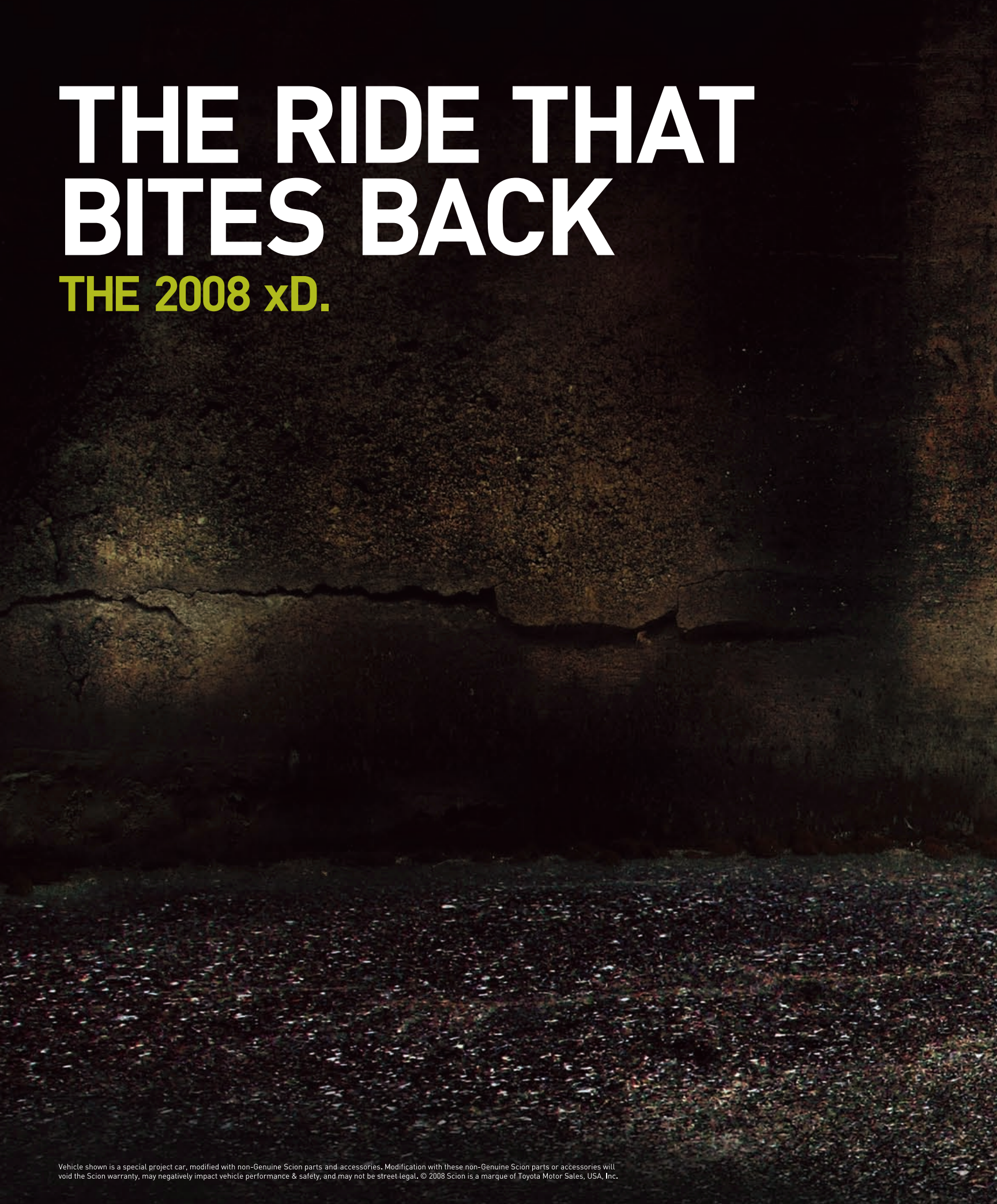
Now that the Pandora manga is out, what's your take on DJ boy and Smith and Weston as normal humans? Please tell me this is an isolated incident.
Micah: We've always felt that the Death Jr. characters needed room to, um, "find themselves" in different media. That said, don't expect DJ boy and Smith and Weston as normal humans in the video games any time soon.

I've been flying the DJ flag for awhile now so I'm really happy that he's made the jump to console—and the Wii is just the perfect home. Finally, console players will see what a cool franchise this is. Are you hoping that this is a new beginning for a run on console?
Micah: We sure hope so. It's up to the players to make it so.
Mike: We sure hope that players take to it on console. We'd like nothing more than to work with a decent budget and create a whole new game from the ground up. We really do love the world and the characters, and every time we feel we are saying goodbye to our little guy, he comes back from the dead, so-to-say.

If you were to create a console sequel would you prefer going cross platform or do you think that the platforming genre has found a new home/safe haven on Wii?
Micah: Our tech is really strong on all of those platforms so I think they're all fair game. They each have their own strengths, and I think it's safe to say that we would be delighted to find a Death Jr. way to take advantage of each.

So now that RoE has made the move to Wii, why not go for broke and do another pass for 360 and PS3… Any thoughts? Sure would be pretty.
Mike: In a heartbeat. Internally, we've seen how good this could look, but it'll come down to sales of the game on Wii. I'd love to take DJ to the PS3 and 360; the possibilities are endless. For starters, we have so much we wanted to do for so long with the game, and circumstances have always driven how much we could pursue. A true console outing would have to be done just right, and we're eager to finally get that chance. When we are testing out new technology, there is a reason we immediately test Death, Jr. out with it. We love it too much to let it go.

DJ and Pandora have undergone a Wii bit of a redsign.



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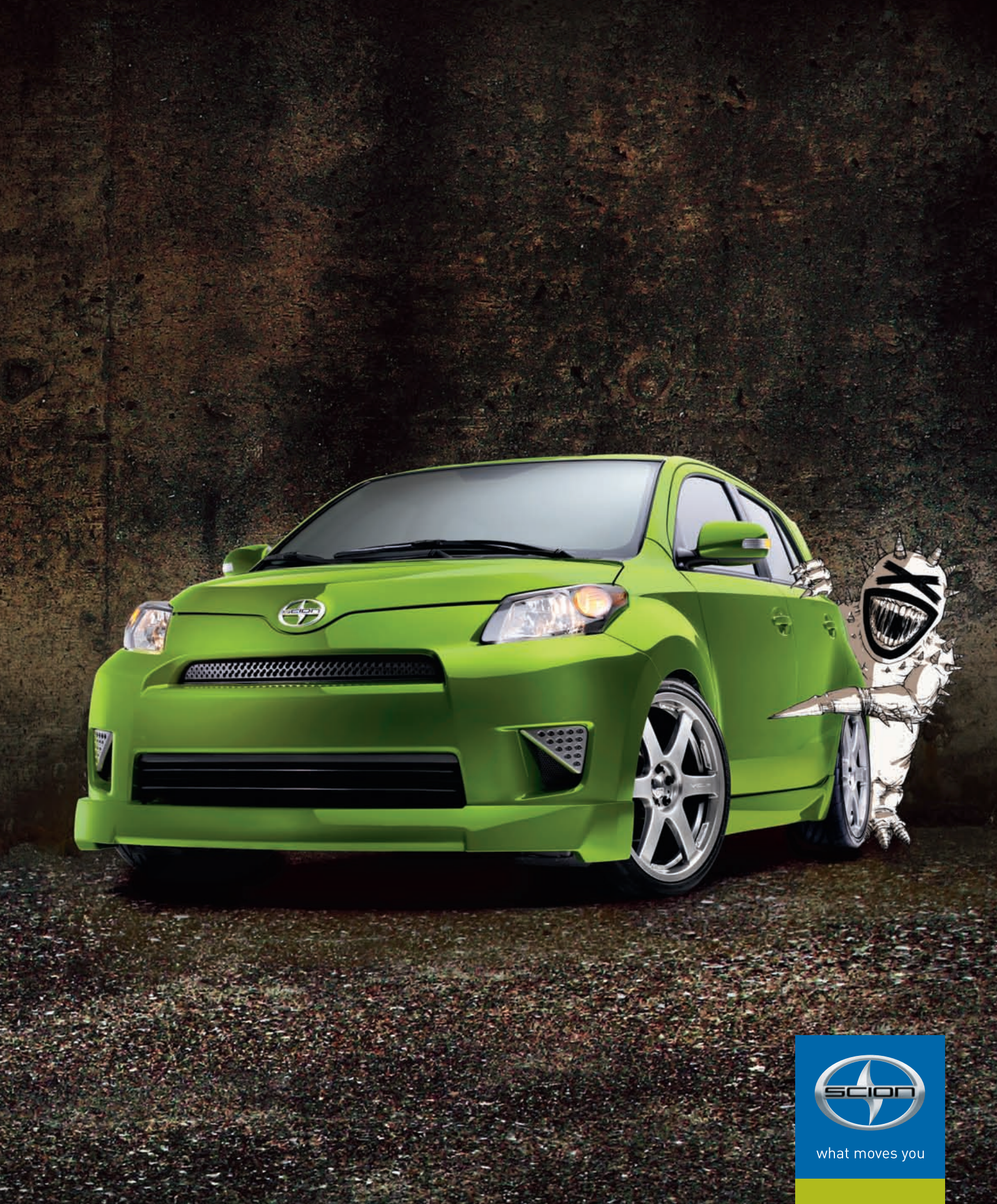
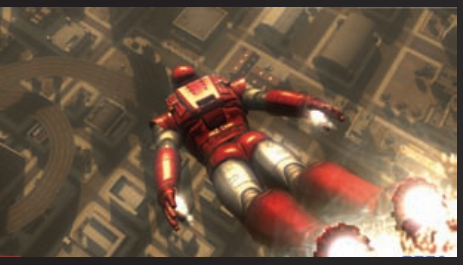
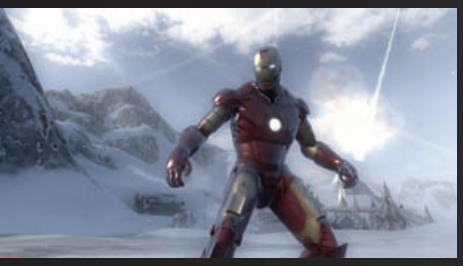

scion
what moves you

Iron Man

The man in the iron mask

words Brady Fiechter





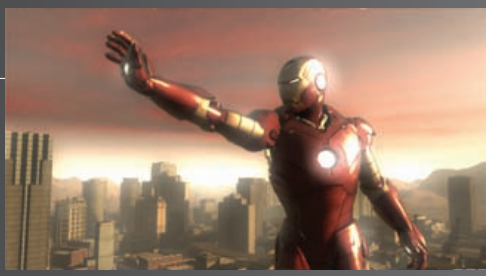
There are many options available for those who claim billionaire status. You could buy an island, a couple of football teams, or if you're Tony Stark, build a super-suit out of iron and fly through the sky. And that is exactly what Tony does, but instead of ending his blueprint with a suit that merely zips around with rocket boots, he outfits his invention with a repulsor beam and missile launcher.

Such extraordinary technology and nasty firepower inevitably lead to a power struggle between good and evil, churning out the kind of classic stuff comic books are made for. And so goes the Iron Man march into a feature film this May, along with the video game of the same name: destruction, destruction, destruction.

The majority of the missions in Iron Man revolve around taking out reams of air and ground targets, establishing a fairly open world design in which you have the option to pinpoint multiple sections of a rolling battlefield. Iron Man is at his strongest in the air, but there's always opportunity to rush ground units with a flurry of melee attacks. If you can get your destructive hands on, say, a tank or turret, you can rip them apart or toss them into the line of fire for even more explosive attacks. If you're quick, you can even grab a missile out of the sky and fling it right back to its source, or better yet, maneuver around the path of a fighter jet and snatch it out of the sky. Definitely one of the game's coolest hooks.

Following the narrative of the film, Iron Man the game opens with a slick representation of the Mark 1, taking the action on foot as this first prototyped suit within the fiction of the world nicely roasts footsoldiers with a giant flame thrower. Perhaps someday watching people flail to their death will grow old in a game, but apparently not just yet.

Enjoy the view, then kill 'em all.



"...maneuver around the path of a fighter jet and snatch it out of the sky."

Iron Man

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Secret Level
Publisher	Sega of America
Available	May

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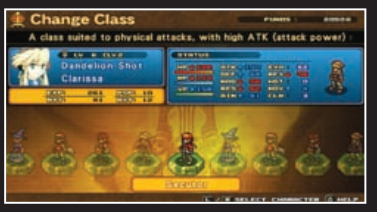

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Lego Batman

The Brick Knight…

words Greg Orlando

"This town needs an enema," and truer words have seldom been spoken. Gotham City is a city in desperate need of a high colonic, especially now that all the supervillains have broken out of Arkham Asylum.

Who's going to clean up Gotham? You? Those fatcats in Washington? Brother Power the Geek? Think again.

This is a job for Batman—or at least the Lego version of such.

DC's Dark Knight Detective joins the Star Wars characters and Indiana Jones in getting the blockhead treatment courtesy of British developer Traveller's Tales. This all-new adventure has players exploring a gritty, darkened Gotham City in an attempt to capture a cadre of no-goodniks such as the Joker, Harley Quinn, the Penguin, Killer Croc, and Scarecrow.

As Batman and his young ward Robin, players will have access to all manner of wonderful toys such as Batarangs, cool vehicles such as the Batmobile, and special suits that take the place of our hero's ubiquitous utility belt. A glider suit, for example, lets Batman soar across huge gaps in the Gotham cityscape. Robin can access a magnetic suit that allows him to scale walls or walk on ceilings.

The game offers basic puzzle-solving challenges, along with a decent amount of platforming and combat. Here, Batman and Robin have to use their abilities smartly in order to gain access to new areas say, with Batman to soaring across buildings and activating a panel to drop a bridge for Robin to cross.

In free play mode, players will be able to take the role of some of Batman's greatest foes, and each has his own special abilities and weapons. Joker wields dual Uzis and has a powerful handbuzzer to electrocute his foes. Harley Quinn can charm security guards with her feminine wiles (in addition to performing a superjump). The Penguin can use his umbrella as a glider and can hurl bombs at foes. "We tried very hard to make the villains' abilities suit their characters," the game's producer Loz Doyle says.

> ""We tried very hard to make the villains' abilities suit their characters," the game's producer Loz Doyle says."

Already Lego Batman exhibits the same goofy charm inherent in the other Lego game titles. One scene featured Joker and Harley capturing police commissioner Jim Gordon and taking him to (where else?) a killer carnival complete with merry-go-round, rollercoaster and a crane to pick up and drop explosive teddy bears. Depending on which side players are on, it will be necessary to capture Gordon or free him. Such is life in darkly depressing, yet oddly fun city of Gotham.

Suddenly it's hip to be square.

Lego Batman	preview
System(s)	X360, PS3, Wii, NDS, PSP, PS2, Mac, PC
Developer	Traveller's Tales
Publisher	Warner. Bros Interactive Entertainment
Available	Fall 2008

LEVEL5

These four top hats are all the same height, but the length of the brim is different. In other words, the hats are equally tall but vary in width.

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Ninja Gaiden II

In Itagaki we trust

words Casey Loe

When Microsoft debuted Ninja Gaiden II's Aqua Capital level at the Tokyo Game Show, we came away slightly underwhelmed. But at last month's GDC, the new Temple of Sacrifice level finally delivered the "wow" factor that earlier demos had been lacking. Within a few seconds of hitting start, Ryu found himself in a vast underground cavern filled with withering trees and what seem to be hives made out of sharpened bones. A crypt-like temple dominates the landscape, surrounded by a rotting cliffside city on the banks of a literal river of blood. (Not the nicest place to raise a family, perhaps, but I'm sure home values are cheap, and the low enrollment at River of Blood Elementary probably leads to plenty of individual attention from the faculty.) Both the scope and design were far more impressive than anything we've seen out of Team Ninja before.

The new demo featured three weapons: Ryu's classic Dragon Sword, an upgraded Lunar (the staff introduced in Ninja Gaiden Black), and a brand-new set of spiked metal tonfas that Ryu can spin at dizzying speeds. What the tonfas lack in range they make up for in power, and in the skilled hands of the demo player they delivered a blistering-fast 39-hit combo that tore every last limb off of no less than three enemy soldiers.

Yes, the loving attention paid to blood spatter and limb dismemberment continues to impress and horrify, and we're even beginning to see signs that it may have use as an actual mechanic. One new enemy had a chainsaw for a right arm and a rocket launcher for the left, and a quick hit from either side could take the arm clean off. You clearly want to make that first hit come from the left, because that freak knows chainsaw tricks that would roil even Marcus Fenix's stomach. The new Ninpo effects—including a whirlwind of head-chopping blades—were quite impressive and seemed extremely useful. The developers have promised that using magic will no longer negatively affect players' scores, another important step in redeeming the Ninpo mechanic.

During his presentation, producer Tomonobu Itagaki announced that Ninja Gaiden II would allow players to upload gameplay films, and that the game would hit store shelves on June 3rd. Every new bit of gameplay we see makes the wait that much harder to bear.

> "The loving attention paid to blood spatter and limb dismemberment continues to impress and horrify."

Ninja Gaiden II	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	6/3/2008

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Fable 2

Make babies, play with Muffy, share the wealth

words Brady Fiechter

Your future home away from home at home...

Fable 2 now contains a very special feature that grants you the power of virtual baby making. Play as a woman, have unprotected sex, and you might be in big trouble. Or blissfully happy depending on perspective.

Either way, family matters, and here is where the outcome of your choices in the world further take form. Developers are starting to enjoy the idea of offering you choices of siding with good or evil, but the moral implications never get much past deciding whether to kill 50 soldiers or the entire army. But however Fable 2 turns out, Peter Molyneux exudes confidence that his game will make you fully aware of how important your actions always are.

One way the game reflects those choices is with that child you'll eventually raise, as he or she grows up a spitting image of their parent. Play the role of Mr. Nasty and the kid will follow suit; dominate your choices with empathy and class and your child grows up to be a good soul as well. Or maybe just kill the wife and send your offspring off to an orphanage and redirect your focus on a life of solitude and plundering. Gold is a hot item, for sure, and Lionhead Studios is implementing a gambling side game on Xbox Live Arcade around the time of Fable 2's release.

This whole "choice" thing is a nebulous presence when you're trying to get a grasp of its potential in a preview, so for now, we can all agree it sounds good the way Molyneux envisions it as he demonstrates another of Fable 2's tenants: cooperative play. As he points out, yes, there never has been much opportunity to explore a role-playing world of this form with a friend, and the idea certainly is enticing. A partner can join at any time, working as a backup as the initial adventurer decides how to divvy up rewards and loot. Working together invites higher levels of experience than if you go around mashing away on buttons on individual foes.

The combat system, as envisioned by Molyneux, will be an absolute breeze to get into—if you can pick up a controller, you can play, so goes the theme—with the entire game requiring no more than a one-button affair if that's what you want out of the Fable 2 action experience. The more impressive and technical your combat becomes, the more reward you'll receive. By game's end, the hero will physically reflect the fruits of your labor.

"...however Fable 2 turns out, Peter Molyneux exudes confidence that his game will make you fully aware of how important your actions always are.."

Fable 2	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Lionhead Studios
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	Fall

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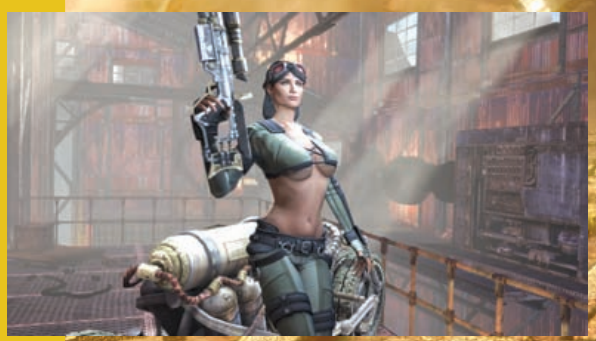
Damnation

A living hell worth living

Damnation has been gestating as a Big Idea for almost a decade now, originally casting seeds to grow a film property, but now it's fully rooted in the gaming space by newly formed developer Blue Omega. If the game's rousing premiere high above San Francisco in the W Hotel wasn't enough to get interests kickstarted, there was plenty of bravado to pick up any slack: "Damnation could do for its genre what Metroid did for sidescrollers."

A brief demo on a laptop is not enough to validate such claims, but there's no hesitation in saying that the bounty of concept designs on display were remarkably high level. As games become more about the artistry than the sophistication, the impact of a game's visions is becoming increasingly subjective, and to this gamer's eyes, something superior is in the making. Many of the shots you see here are introductory stretches of the game; the rusty tones will give way to a wide spectrum of color schemes and settings.

The idea behind Damnation is to distill iconic imagery from throughout the ages, pulling together such disparate threads as World War 1, the western and biker culture, yet never straying from a [illegible]old on the



Hello, stranger...

sci-fi and supernatural. When the lead character, ominous and enigmatic, pulls up on a bike that looks like something out of Final Fantasy mixed with Mad Max, you take immediate notice. Blue Omega nailed the protagonist for this type of game.

Damnation is loosely being billed as a Gears of War-meets-Tomb Raider-meets-Prince of Persia, but more Gears of War if you go with the generalization. It sounds good to compare your game to Gears of War, but what excited me was the extensive environmental interaction the demo showcased far more than the action component. The hook is: if it looks like it can be jumped on, grabbed or explored, it probably can. See that window right next to you that appears a lot more convenient than running down a long hallway? Crash through it and you're out on the roof. There's always more than one way to navigate an area, which may extend hundreds of stories upwards by the end of the path. In order to ground the space with visual cues, you'll have reference points spanning throughout the setting that hope to create an adventurous sense of scale.

If the Gears of War references must be made, at least remove the thought of duck-and-cover and plodding, methodical action. The game plays with a swift third-person perspective, calling on a streamlined character who is diverse and nimble to observe going through the kill.

Blue Omega's design process is also worth noting. Instead of handling everything in one studio space, a core team is being funneled assets from outside sources. Blue Omega is quick to point out this is not typical outsourcing. All the details coming your way soon...

Damnation preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Blue Omega
Publisher	Codemasters
Available	Fall

"There's always more than one way to navigate an area, which may extend hundreds of stories upwards by the end of the path."

Disgaea 3

An Oedipus Rex for the PlayStation generation

words Casey Loe

Some video game heroes fight for love, some fight for justice, and some fight to preserve their imperiled worlds. But Mao, the protagonist of Disgaea 3, has motivations that may hit a little closer to home for our readers. His father has "accidentally" smashed his treasured "DeathOmegaStation Portable," obliterating four million hours of gameplay data, including a level-9999 party that's just about to take on the last boss of the original Disgaea. So vile a crime cannot go unavenged—Mao's father must die.

Since Mao is a demon and his father is the devil, exacting revenge will not be easy. Mao has played enough video games and read enough manga to know that it takes a great hero to defeat a great evil, and is prepared to become a hero solely for the purpose of slaying his father. Don't expect a tale of redemption: Mao hopes to study the noble concepts that motivate heroes not by combating his own irredeemably evil nature, but by capturing a hero and dissecting him. That'll require some book learning, which means going to school—for the first time ever. Fortunately, since his is an evil school built upon the principles of delinquency and disobedience, Mao's perfect record of non-attendance has already earned him a spot on the honor roll and made him a legend in his class.

Disgaea's grand tradition of comedic storytelling has produced yet another weirdly enthralling quest that is legitimately funny, wildly original, and beautifully voice-acted (in the Japanese version, at least). Mao is an awesome main character and a drastic departure from the usual anti-hero mold, and Disgaea 3's Academy of Evil cleverly parodies the trite magic-school genre and offers plenty of laugh-out-loud moments.

In combat, the game sticks close to the Disgaea formula: You create a roster of combatants in a wide variety of classes, and deploy up to ten of them in any one fight. Characters can employ typical strategy tactics like casting spells and using special attacks, as well as quirkier moves like throwing other characters across chasms, throwing enemies into other enemies to make a single super-foe, or piling allies on top of other allies to create a mighty combat tower. The battles are unusually fast-paced for a strategy title, and a generous take-back system lets you move characters around without committing to anything until you begin executing spells and attacks.

> "Disgaea 3's Academy of Evil cleverly parodies the trite magic-school genre and offers plenty of laugh-out-loud moments."

Outside of combat, the schoolhouse motif provides a new structure for the series' deep character-building systems. While Mao is out prowling the town, your party hangs out in their "homeroom," where you can arrange them into clubs (*evil* clubs, naturally) that tighten their bonds and grant them special abilities, or change their seating arrangements to increase the odds that they'll pull off combo attacks with adjacent classmates. When you want to expand the size of the class, start a new club, or improve the selection at school shops, you can send a classmate to petition Disgaea 3's version of the Dark Assembly—a faculty meeting where generous applications of booze and chloroform can change long-standing school policies.

Most of the homeroom mechanics are just variations of old systems, but the slight refinements will change the ways you approach character-building and combat. However, the lack of completely new mechanics is a little disappointing. The big additions seem to be limited to new Geo Panel gimmicks and the ability of monsters to transform into powerful weapons that can be temporarily wielded by a member of their school club. That one is fun, but rarely worth using.

Disgaea 3 will run at any resolution up to 1080p, but it mostly reuses character sprites drawn for 480i PlayStation 2 games. So while the sprites look great from far away, they're blurry and pixelated up close. There are some nice effects on spells and combo attacks, and the hi-res artwork on dialogue scenes is lovely, but Disgaea 3 could easily be ported to the PlayStation 2 or Wii without looking significantly different. At least the game benefits from widescreen battle maps and the PS3's increased memory; there are no loading times and a wider variety of battle animations and voices than there were in the last-gen Disgaea games.

We were going to run an import review of Disgaea 3, but NIS America announced a U.S. release just before we went to press, so we'll withhold final judgment until we see the North American localization. Disgaea 3 certainly isn't a revolutionary game, but it is an entertaining one, and the quick turnaround is great news for PS3 owners. With its replayable story and infinite number of item-world maps, Disgaea 3 has a nearly endless amount of content to keep your PS3 humming during the lulls of summer.

Disgaea 3 — preview

System(s)	PS3
Developer	Nippon Ichi
Publisher	NIS America
Available	August

Fun with blocks.

Castle Crashers

2D or not 2D... Is not the question. Just give it here!!

words Matt Cabral

Drink in the hand drawn 2D splendor!

This action-packed beat-'em-up is the The Behemoth's latest brainchild. After scoring a monster hit with the highly addictive, cartoony side-scroller Alien Hominid, they're returning to gamers with a familiar—Dan Paladin's inspired hand-drawn art is in full effect—yet more ambitious sophomore effort. Twenty levels, four player co-op, and more of the side-stitching humor—supported by plenty of cartoon gore and poo jokes—that made Hominid as much fun to watch as it was to play, complement Crashers' unique take on the classic genre.

Playing as one of four squat knights (up to three buddies can control the remaining brawlers, or you can go it alone if you don't wanna fight for EXP and loot), you'll hack, slash and beat your way through villages, forests and, of course, castles, as well as many other medieval-inspired environments. Your objectives are simple: kill, collect loot, kill some more, save a princess, kill. But how you travel this path of damsel-rescuing and destruction varies depending on which knight you choose. Don the orange armor and you'll access the ability to shoot fireballs. Play as the blue knight and you can cast foe-freezing ice magic. If projectile poison is your weapon of choice, you'll wanna go with green, or suit-up in red to hurl electro-bolts. All are effective, upgradable and yield hilarious death animations; one of our faves includes lightning bolts that reveal an enemy's skeleton, as though they've just stuck their finger in an electrical socket.

In addition to magic, players can enlist a host of more traditional tools of destruction, both melee (swords, maces) and ranged (boomerangs, bow and arrows) to do their bloody bidding. Like your more mystical means, these too can be upgraded at an in-between-stages blacksmith shop. Collecting gold and gaining battle experience also contribute to how kick-ass your knight can become. But don't worry, as hordes of goblins, soldiers and other battle-bringin' baddies populate each level, there's more than enough loot and EXP to go around.

While much of the game sees you wading through wave after wave of low-level bad guys and occasional bosses, CC does incorporate other gameplay styles. One such variation has you riding atop an adorable fawn—seriously, this thing makes Bambi look menacing—while being chased by an enormous, arm-flailing monster. As you leap over obstacles and navigate through doors, the screen pushes you forward, and your ride expresses fear, literally, by being scared shitless; yep, that's a trail of diarrhea behind your Disney-like doe.

CC's wickedly warped sense of humor promises to follow your entire adventure; don't be surprised if a crowd gathers just to watch the funny-infused action. From its accessible, arcadey gameplay to its twisted take on fantasy staples, Castle Crashers should have us gripping our gamepads and grabbing our sides when it lands on XBLA later this summer.

"Your objectives are simple: kill, collect loot, kill some more, save a princess, kill."

Castle Crashers	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360 (XBLA)
Developer	The Behemoth
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	Q3 08

Bionic Commando: Rearmed

Dreams really do come true

words Matt Cabral

"Holy s**t, 2D side-scrollers are so not dead! The game's eye-candy-coated visuals are brought to stunning life..."

With the next-gen Bionic Commando sequel grabbing all the attention, it's easy to forget about the Xbox Live Arcade remake of the 8-bit NES classic. That is, until you get a look at it. Holy s**t, 2D side-scrollers are so not dead! The game's eye-candy-coated visuals are brought to stunning life with some of the best lighting, shadowing and particle effects we've seen in any game, period. From tiny spent shell casings to explosive fuel drums, everything looks spectacular. And that goes double for our mechanically-inclined hero; Nathan Spencer still sports his trademark green fatigues and fire-red hair, but his tweaked look and animations elevate him to a lifelike level usually reserved for cyber stars of full-on HD titles. The first time you spy him tossing an oil drum at a hovering drone-like boss baddie, you'll know exactly what we mean—amazing stuff.

From level layouts to boss battles, Rearmed will contain close to 90% of the content from the original. Of course, 20 years have passed since we first swung from that kick-ass arm, so Nathan has picked up a few new tricks; his long-reaching limb can now grab bad guys below him, as well as snatch up unsuspecting henchmen, right before tossing them to their death. New gameplay modes—like sure-to-be-addictive two player co-op and Metal Gear VR mission-like challenges—have also been added to spice up the prosthetically enhanced experience. Rearmed swings onto XBLA (and PSN and PC) this summer as a too-good teaser to the franchise's next-gen debut.

Bionic Commando: Rearmed preview

System(s)	Xbox 360 (XBLA), PS3 (PSN), PC
Developer	GRIN
Publisher	Capcom
Available	Q3 08

What a difference a few hundred bits make...

Grand Theft Auto IV

These little town blues . . .

words Greg Orlando

With apologies to the Chairman of the Board, Frank Sinatra, if you can make it there—and by there it is meant Rockstar's New York aka Liberty City—you can make it anywhere.

"Welcome to Liberty City, where the people are angry and lonely, and the taxes sky-high," the Web site for Grand Theft Auto IV proclaims at one moment and then, "Welcome to Liberty City: Overpriced real estate in a cultural wasteland," the next.

This is not Rudolph Giuliani's safe and shiny New York. The polish has come off this version of the Big Apple, and it's a fine place for newcomer Niko Bellic to try and carve out a successful career as a criminal.

Bellic is the cousin of one Roman Bellic, a hapless entrepreneur operating out of the Express Car Service in Grand Theft Auto's Brooklyn (called "Broker"). Roman is, to put it mildly, a *shlimazl*, a luckless person for whom nothing goes right. Throughout the game, he'll be perpetually chased, threatened with beatings, pummeled, and be in need of rescuing. Guess who gets that job…

A near-finished version of IV emerged recently, and it's easy to note exactly how Rockstar's improved on the series' run-and-gun formula. First and foremost, Rockstar has attacked two of Auto's traditional weak spots in its navigation, brawling, and weapons aiming system. Grand Theft Auto IV now features an in-game navigation system that plots out a route Niko needs to drive to a given destination. A series of colored lines on the game's minimap show players a safe, legal (but not necessarily the quickest) route to a location. If Niko hijacks a luxury car, he'll be able to follow vocal directions to a target.

Aiming has been similarly improved. A free-aim system removes a lot of the peril involved in shootouts, allowing players to scan across a battlefield to pick out any target they choose. The traditional lock-on system remains in place, but it's nowhere near as finicky as it was in previous iterations of the series. This, coupled with a new melee combat system that offers kicks, punches, and combination hits mapped to the Xbox 360/PlayStation 3 controller's face buttons, serves to fill in the vast landscape of potholes that had plagued Grand Theft Auto.

Now, it's possible, too, to feel the brutality as Liberty City opens itself up to adventure and mischief. Euphoria technology imbues every citizen with

"This is not Rudolph Giuliani's safe and shiny New York..."

an artificial central nervous system and drive for self-preservation. Pedestrians will put their hands out to soften the blow from an oncoming car. Thugs knocked off a building will reach and stretch for something, anything to impede their fall. Niko himself, upon a particularly violent impact, will be tossed from a car's windshield and land in a crumpled heap.

It's a beautiful, truly gritty world IV throws up. The faux Coney Island sports a decaying Wonder Wheel and a parachute drop, symbols of a forgotten age. Liberty City is ever changing, with weather effects and a day/night cycle that bathes the boroughs in shadows and gleaming sunlight alike. The neon lights of Liberty City's Broadway are nothing but impressive, right down to the oversized billboards hawking sex in the form of a barely covered female buttocks.

Niko can test out his brawling skills on a decaying basketball court; Ultimate Fighting Championship competitor Bas Rutten consulted with Rockstar to get the game's brawling moves just right, and players will delight in being able to, say, have Niko lean back to avoid a wild haymaker and then follow up with a walloping blow of his own. During car combat, Niko can auto-aim his guns, or drop grenades out of the window to righteously foul his enemy's plans.

Multiplayer, as of press time a carefully guarded secret, is also on tap for IV. Xbox 360 owners will be able to access extra missions via downloadable content on Xbox 360 Live. This, however, is very much the sideshow. The main event, a sprawling Liberty City, demands to be conquered. Crime, here, will probably pay.

There's more than one way to make money.

Grand Theft Auto IV

preview

System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Developer	Rockstar Games
Publisher	Rockstar Games
Available	April

Hail to the Chimp

Now that's evolution

words Brady Fiechter

While Hail to the Chimp doesn't offer you the chance to pummel Hillary Clinton (hey now...or John McCain, or Barack Obama, or Ralph Nader for messing with things), the game does take a mighty fine stab at our mighty fine political system, pitting a group of animal pundits against one another for a fight for the right to rule the free world, also known as the Animal Kingdom, also known as the free world. When asked by Gamecock PR what candidate I felt most represented my political views, I immediately pointed to Moxie the Musk Ox, whose sturdy posture and long flowing locks couldn't be ignored. My mistake was thinking she was a yak, something I am told is an offensive misnomer, which didn't matter much in the ring, where the other candidates met the wrath of my hooves. Someone in the room made a reference to Powerstone during the battle for political supremacy, which I suppose could loosely define this party brawler, but there's obviously a much less complex system to grapple with here and Powerstone didn't have rigged voting machines to destroy or news clips and the such skewering the rule of government for humor. As for those much-coveted votes, you get to violently collect them in the form of clams. Hail to the Chimp.

Hail to the Chimp	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Wideload
Publisher	Gamecock
Available	May

The Incredible Hulk

Sega green!

words Greg Orlando

Make with the smashing and wanton destruction. Sega and Edge of Reality are teaming up to bring Marvel Comics' misunderstood behemoth the Incredible Hulk to video game consoles this summer.

Little is known about the game, but it will follow the events of the second Hulk film, which is set to release on June 13. The film stars Edward Norton as Dr. Bruce Banner, Liv Tyler as Banner's true love Betty Ross, and William Hurt as General Thunderbolt Ross.

Sega's promised Hulk will be a third-person, open-world adventure in the vein of the Vivendi-made GameCube, Xbox, and PlayStation 2 game The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction and not a straightforward action game like the company's movie tie-in Hulk. Ultimate Destruction was lauded for its open-ended play. Hulk was largely criticized for its use of "puny" Bruce Banner in stealth sequences and for its overuse of gamma-irradiated Hulk-dogs as enemies.

It's expected this new Hulk game will allow players to tear the hell out of New York City, and fight such established enemies as the green-skinned Abomination. Extra characters have been added to flesh out the storyline, but none of these heroes or villains have yet been announced.

The Incredible Hulk	preview
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Edge of Reality
Publisher	Sega
Available	June

Reviews

April 2008

play magazine GAME of the MONTH

Okami Wii
Super Smsh Bros. Brawl
Condemned 2: Bloodshot
Viking: Battle for Asgard
Army of Two
SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1
Sega Superstar Tennis
World War II Aces
FIFA Street 3

Castle of Shikigami III
Mana Khemia : Alchemists of Al-Revis
Obscure: The Aftermath
PixelJunk Monsters

play Staff "Round-up"

Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, sandbox, rhythm
Now playing: Condemned 2, Death Jr. RoE, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Monster Madness GD, Lost Odyssey, Wall*E, The World Ends With You, Ninja Gaiden DS, Viking:Battle for Asgard
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Gorillaz

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: PixelJunk, Strikers
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Blade Runner (console)

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now Playing : Burnout, Army of 2 **Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game:** Turtledove's Great War Series

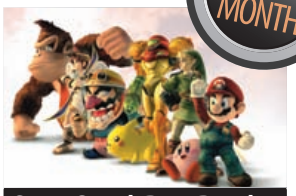
Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Sam & Max, Mythos, Audiosurf **Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game:** Blade Runner (console)

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.



Super Smash Bros. Brawl
pg.058

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9....Extraordinary
8....Great
7....Good
6....Decent
5....Average
4....Below average
3....Poor
2....Bad
1....Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Soma Bringer, Tori no Hoshi
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Hayao Miyazaki's Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: Etrian Odyssey, DMC4
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: A Game of Thrones

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Ridge Racer 2 PSP, Mana K
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Nausicaa game from Team ICO

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc. **Now playing:** No More Heroes, Turok, Crisis Core
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Face/Off

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: PixelJunk Monsters
Brand I'd most like to see adapted to a game: Red Dwarf

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Okami

Boy, are Wii lucky…

words Dave Halverson

Okami, to me, is one of the most important games of the past 15 years. Not because it features an elegant mythological story told through a tree spirit and a bug (sorry Issun), nor because it features a mute four-legged wolf god as a savior—although both points are worthy of a moment of silence for Clover Studios. What makes Okami so timeless is an art style that transcends technology. It looks as new today as it did in 2006. And it will look as new in 2010 as it does in 2008. In rare circumstances art can actually triumph over technology. Never has that rung so true as with Okami. Presented in widescreen 480p (and I could swear it's a tad more saturated) on Wii, Nippon never looked so good.

But that's only the beginning of this game's towering achievement. It also set new standards in interaction via the celestial brush used in both the real-time battles and the practical world where the player wields the brush like a god, bearing sunlight, fruit and safe passage.

How is it then that Okami became the final nail in Clover Studios' coffin? After reinventing side-scrolling action with Viewtiful Joe and adventure with Okami, they were thanked with dismal sales. The fact of the matter is that high-concept avant-garde games appeal to a relatively small (yet oh-so-appreciative) audience. It isn't until later that the rest of the world catches up. It's the Blade Runner effect all over again. The greatest science fiction movie ever created tanked out of the gate, but over time became a legend in filmmaking. I can only hope that this Wii version of Okami has the same effect.

One thing is for sure: the game is certainly more at home on the Wii than it was on PS2. It's almost as if Inaba-san had the Wii in mind when he designed the Celestial Brush, a means for slashing enemies, solving puzzles, reviving plants and so forth, painting on the screen as if the game was a living canvas. Doing so via the PS2 analog was more matter-of-fact, where the Wiimote actually requires a bit of mastery on the player's part, positioning the camera and then completing the appropriate strokes.

Early on—following her resurrection—Amaterasu is joined by Issun (a tiny bug-like warrior who bounces around like an angry flea), her lone disciple in the war against the eight-headed demon Orochi who has been unleashed again upon Nippon. According to Issun, "Each brush technique is a power of one of the 13 brush gods. Originally, all 13 were a single powerful deity. When the deity died, its power was split into 13 separate gods. The gods now dwell in objects all around us."

I'd liken the deities to the apostles, but they're a digit over the legal limit. Anyway, it's your job to master the celestial brush, reunite the celestial beings, cleanse the land and seal the demon. A tall order for a canine and a bug, but oh what a glorious journey this is. Some of the most unique and engaging gameplay ever is at hand—well, at both hands now—as you cross vast plains and mountainous regions engaging in a magnificent array of evolving play mechanics and epic battles, pausing only to converse with the odd inhabitants of Nippon, including Sakuya, the playful wood sprite/guardian of Kamiki village; Susano, descendant of Nagi, who helped Amaterasu slay the beast once upon a time only to have his boneheaded descendant accidentally free it again; and the mysterious (but oh so flamboyant) Waka. I really like the Saki lady too, but that's a story for another day. We'll stop there for spoiler's sake. It's not like that many people have actually played Okami. With any luck, however, that will soon change. So go forth Wii faithful! Taketh thy Wiimote to screen so that Nippon can bloom again in the afterglow of your epic journey!

Okami — score 9.5

+	In the tradition of Ico, a game like no other that will never age. Completely at home on the Wiimote & Nunchuk
–	Wiimote calligraphy can be tricky

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Ready at Dawn / Clover Studios (original)
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	March 25

"...high-concept avant-garde games appeal to a relatively small (yet oh-so-appreciative) audience. It isn't until later that the rest of the world catches up."

One Wolf to rule them all.

Interview ▶

The Art of Translation

With special guest Didier Malenfant, co-founder and president of Ready At Dawn

"...having played with the hardware a bit during this project, I can tell you that the Ready At Dawn Engine would scream on this console."

"Boss" battles are as elegantly beautiful as they are engaging.

A village of intrigue awaits.

play: Since RAD started you've had quite a run. Now, for your first console game you get the nod to deliver one of the greatest and most undervalued games in the industry. Is this a job you chased or were pitched?

Didier Malenfant: We created RAD to work on games that we're passionate about. Even if we worked on someone else's license, we made sure that we put our spin on it. Okami was a bit different because it kind of came out of nowhere. We weren't looking for a project but met Christian Svensson of Capcom at GDC. We mutually gushed at each other's projects, how he loved Daxter and how we loved Okami. A week later Christian called us offering us Okami on the Wii. We just couldn't turn it down.

What is the difference between your game and the original aside from the obvious 16:9 480p?

The new controls are obviously the biggest change we made to the game. We not only used them for the Celestial Brush but also for the in-game where we use the Nunchuck. Most of the minigames also use the Wiimote where appropriate.

Were you tempted at all to add an extra level or new content? And if you were did you have the creative license to do so or was this strictly a "make it go fast on Wii" kind of deal?

It was a "get it working again on PS2, then make it work on Wii, then see how much time is left" kinda deal. As programmers know, code that doesn't get used goes stale over time, so when we got the stuff from Japan, it wasn't even compiling or building on PS2. We would have loved to add more content but you're looking at a 40 hour+ game already and, to be honest, I don't know if we could have done the game justice with such time constraints. To add to a game like Okami, we would have needed the time necessary to ensure we met the same level of quality as the original game.

Was anyone from ex-Clover made available or utilized? Any problem getting your assets or was this a smooth transition?

We were completely on our own as far as figuring out how the code worked and what were the best choices in porting it to the Wii. It's a very difficult thing to do when you're trying to decode someone else's engine. No one does things the same way so we spent a lot of time scratching our heads wondering why Clover did some things the way they did.

Given how different PS2 and Wii development is, did porting up pose any specific problems?

The trickiest part was the rendering pipeline, which is very different on both platforms. Once we got everything running we spent a lot of time trying to adapt all the rendering tricks and filters that the game uses on PS2 to the Wii. One good example of that is the "paper" texture that is seen on PS2. It's still there on the Wii, but it's much less pronounced. The Wii has a much bigger dynamic range for its colors and the graphics look much less washed out on the Wii than on the PS2. Every time we increase the paper effect, we lost color depth. It's been a balancing act we had to take toward the end of the project.

What drove you to port an existing license for your first console game? Testing the waters? Is this a precursor to an original RAD IP on console?

Okami was really a big coincidence; we didn't need a second project at that time but we were just such fans of the game that we decided to grow a little bit to accommodate for one. We have been developing two new IPs for a while now, which are the two projects we're moving onto next, but there wasn't really any master plan to use Okami as a stepping stone. We did it just for fun.

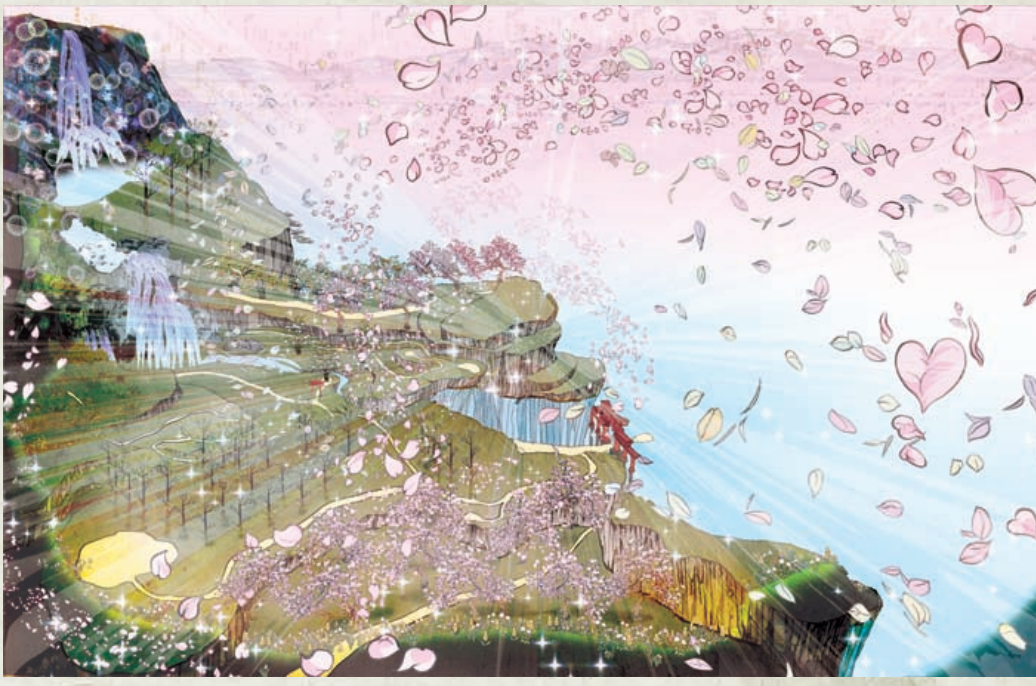
Recently at GDC I was shown some

incredibly impressive Wii tech demos featuring real normal mapping, practical water, reflections, dynamic lighting… effects that haven't made their way into a Wii game yet but are possible. Now that you've looked under the hood what do you think? Can these elements be implemented into a game, or are there memory constraints?

As you know Okami uses Clover's engine but, having played with the hardware a bit during this project, I can tell you that the Ready At Dawn Engine would scream on this console. That's the advantage of being a console engine from the start as opposed to taking a PC engine and trying to shoe-horn in onto consoles. Any of that stuff is doable in-game on the Wii, as long as you have the right tech behind it.

Are you using Nintendo's compiler or your own?

We used Nintendo's compiler and libraries. Again, time was of the essence on this project.



"There were so many people who said that it should have been a Wii game when Okami came out."

The art of fighting through the eyes of Amaterasu.

Would you agree that Okami was lost on the PS2 and that the Wii is a much better fit/user base? The game certainly feels at home on Wii.

There were so many people who said that it should have been a Wii game when Okami came out. And anyone who tries the new controls cannot imagine going back to the PS2 pad after that. It's an incredible opportunity for everyone who missed out on Okami the first time around to experience what is, in my mind, one of the most groundbreaking titles of the last few years.

I love the way you've implemented the controls. The painting strokes are right at home on the Wiimote. Was it tricky transitioning from the PS2 pad to the Wiimote?

It's a lot like physics in most games. People think they want realistic physics in games but the fact is realism doesn't feel very good. So we fudge a lot of the numbers to make the game more playable. With the brush, we also applied a bunch of tweaks to the Wiimote input to make it "feel" better. Even if it's not exactly what the user is doing. I think the results turned out great.

I may be reading into this a bit much but bear with me. You came out of the gate looking like a Sony studio, producing groundbreaking PSP properties. Does this signal a move to broaden your horizons? Might we see RAD DS or Wii games that raise the bar in the same way? Nintendo is leading the race on both console and handheld. Or have you simply grown enough to work on multiple games at a time?

I think people kind of assumed that we were owned by Sony at this point and nothing could be further from the truth. We're 100% independent and we work on the games we want to work on. The success of our first game and what people have seen of GoW so far has given us this freedom. We're planning on working on two games this year, a big one and a small one, which are both original IPs developed by RAD. It's pretty exciting stuff.

Anything in particular you'd like to say/add about Okami?

Give the Wii version a try, even if you've played the PS2 version. The new controls alone make it worth it. It just completely transforms the game and the pace. It's the way Okami was meant to be played.

天照
初代
オキクルミ
一尺
一寸
天道太子一寸

参悪鬼
壱悪鬼
肆悪鬼
弐悪鬼
一寸法師

風神

おお…
我らが慈母 アマテラス大神
御許 影と なり給いて
この 風神 闇路に 惑いたるも
雲晴れて 闇の現に 光射したる今
我 天駆ける 風となりて
世を 掻き暗す
あやかしどもを 吹き祓わん！

Universe at War
Earth Assault

words Greg Orlando

Scorched Earth Policy

The humans aren't a faction in the real-time strategy game Universe at War: Earth Assault; they're an afterthought.

An alien race, The Hierarchy, has come to Earth, and not to sample its many and varied culinary delights. Instead, they bring wholesale destruction. As the Earth forces are quickly swept aside, two new races join in the fight in the high-tech Novus and the non-aligned Masari. So, basically, kiss your human ass goodbye.

Earth Assault does a fairly good job of translating a PC real-time strategy's mouse-and-keyboard controls to the Xbox 360 controller, but players should be aware there's a lengthy tutorial required to get them up to speed. Even a simple task such as highlighting all available fighting units can be done in two separate ways: a single tap of the "X" button on the Xbox 360's controller selects all combat units on the game screen, whereas a double tap of said button selects all the units on the entirety of the map.

Each of the races offered here is fairly diverse. The Hierarchy control huge walking production centers that can absorb tremendous amounts of damage, and can enslave both humans and members of alien races. The Novus can dramatically improve their technology by using special "patches" (upgrades) and are able to teleport their units almost instantaneously via a series of conduits. Finally, the Masari are a non-aligned race that took refuge on Earth. Masari use light and dark energy to specialize their units for attack and defense, and do not rely on harvesting materials (or people) to generate resources. In addition to a host of different unit types, each of the warring sides has its own hero characters. These heroes can access special attacks, but must be protected at all costs. Lose them in battle, and the mission ends. Ignominiously.

The game packs an enormous wallop from the onset. Players are tasked with taking the role of the dwindling Earth forces to rescue the President of the United States. Here, players are shown exactly what's become of the planet and made to understand why humans aren't much of a threat to anyone. It's possible to use tanks, helicopters, and soldiers to stand off against The Hierarchy and rescue the President, but only barely.

After rescuing the President, players can begin the campaign mode in earnest, playing from the perspective of the Novus, Hierarchy, and Masari. Consider these single-player challenges to be a warm-up for the main event: a great online mode that supports up to eight players, cross-platform play, and offers a series of rewards that translate to improvements for a player's game units. It's also great fun to engage in some slash-and-burn with Assault's conquer the world mode. Here, players battle for specific parts of Earth and then fight to keep their territories. Ming the Merciless, ruler of the universe, would be mightily pleased.

> "The game packs an enormous wallop from the onset. Players are tasked with taking the role of the dwindling Earth forces to rescue the President..."

Universe at War: Earth Assault — score 8.5

+	A robust and engaging RTS with all the trimmings
–	Keyboard to controller transition a bit wonky

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Petroglyph
Publisher	Sega o
Online/Multi	8-player cross platform
ESRB Rating	T
Available	February

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Condemned 2 Bloodshot

Slip into something psychotic...

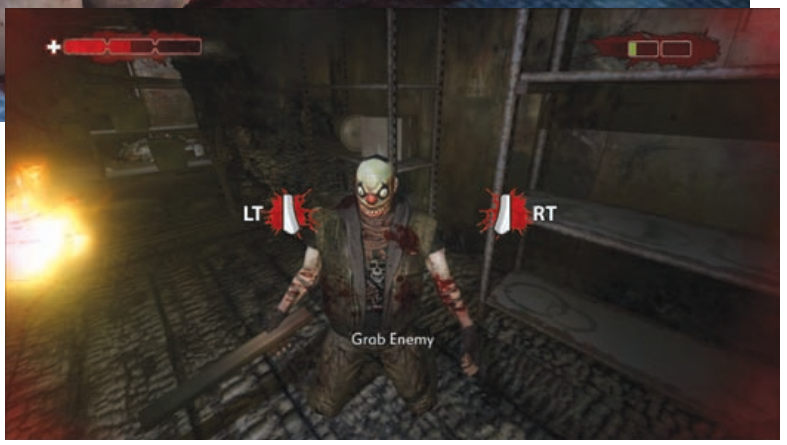
Krusty just hasn't been himself lately

words Dave Halverson

When we meet up with Ethan Thomas for our second outing, the glue that binds him to the grim reality that surrounds him is all but withered. He's a raging alcoholic on the bitter edge, his broken psyche prone to frequent hallucinations and all-out rage. Guess who gets to put Humpty Dumpty back together again? It's one thing to partake in such a disturbingly beautiful and taut thrill ride, but to be part and parcel to a man's psychosis, well, that's the kind of interaction that a first-person adventure needs for me to truly invest myself. Condemned is a game of few gimmicks. Monolith has refined the controls and reward a job well done with useful items (such as a stun gun, holster, rubber soles, steel toes, etc.), but there's no HUD or menu here to speak of. Bloodshot is an excursion through the kind of palpable evil we're used to seeing from David Fincher, only here we get to play the lead.

In the 11 months that have elapsed since the events of Criminal Origins, the city has only gotten worse. Sucked back into the SKX serial killer investigation when Van Horne turns up alive, the basic Condemned construct remains the same, only refined in every way. The forensics work is now tethered to a visual multiple-choice assessment that has a direct effect on your evaluation (and just rewards) and the melee combat has been given a complete overhaul in the form of a deftly integrated block, parry, and combo system capped off by context-sensitive environmental kills. Pick-ups have also been dramatically overhauled. The standard pipe, conduit, bats and so forth all make the scene but pale in comparison to the likes of creepy exploding dolls, gumball

> "...the basic Condemned construct remains the same, only refined in every way."



The pause that refreshes...

machines, bowling balls (hurling objects is also key) and other such endemic homicidal tools of the trade. The melee is ever so gratifying but there's no denying the sheer delight of burying a medieval battle axe into a madman's chest cavity. As for the AI, the resident evil in this one make the last game's look silly. Driven even more insane by the sonic emitters hidden throughout the city (which you must also find and destroy), your nemeses come in all shapes and sizes, only this time they're more prone to attack in groups, or each other. So while the flow of the game remains much the same (if it ain't broke…) everything around you is much more sensory than before. Audible keys and forensic excursions are as disturbing ever, and the combat doesn't get any better. Monolith ramps up the pace with devilish precision: Just when you think you've got it all figured out they reclaim dominion over your survival skills. Staggering off the bus in Trenton, for instance (which comes after an unforgettable excursion through a frozen wilderness and lodge you'll not soon forget), you're confronted with two mad gunners and a spray-can-igniting punk chick all at once. Unarmed you're pretty much toast unless you properly evaluate the situation. In this case using your stun gun to knock the gun out of the first guy's hand is key; other times the only way out is to run and pray that your stalkers stumble on an environmental kill. Often times you'll need to trigger a proximity kill…a certain rabid grizzly bear comes to mind…

The detail throughout is, simply put: perfection. Nobody does practical environments like Monolith. Not only is this the best first-person adventure I've played but it's the most brutal, skillfully detailed and paced as well. This is what "survival horror" was meant to be. Story, pacing, character design, graphics, control, replay value (bum fight here we come)…it's all here plus the first-ever real-time alcohol engine. Steady those guns people; this is a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to decompose here.

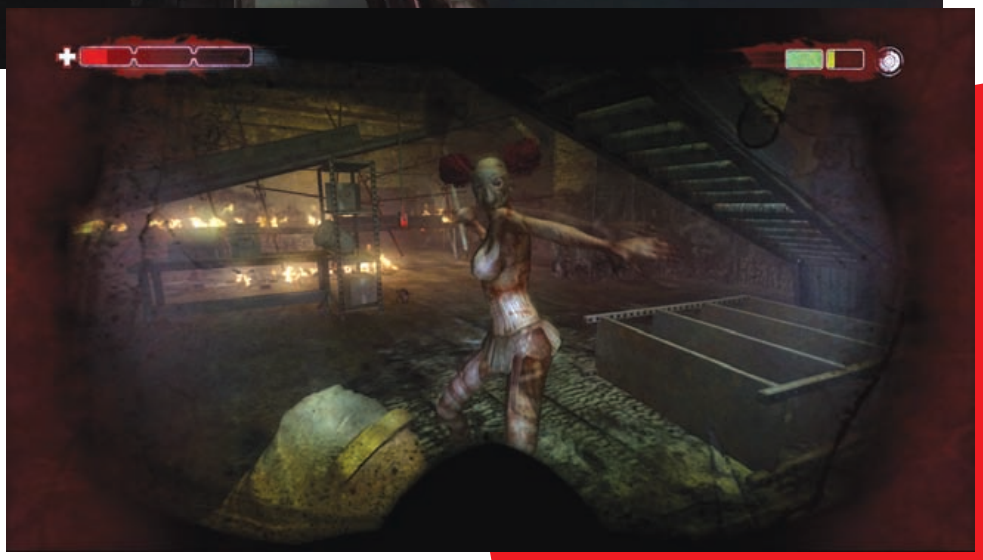
Condemned 2: Bloodshot

score 9.5

+	Full appendages, deep interactive story, great new play mechanics, utterly enthralling.
–	Could benefit from a broader score.

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, PC
Developer	Monolith Prod.
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	Crime Scene, Deathmatch, Bum Rush
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March 11

It's all about the atmosphere...



"The detail throughout is, simply put: perfection. Nobody does practical environments like Monolith."

Army of TWO

Army of, say, Eight out of 10

words Greg Orlando

You can truly be all you can be in this Army of Two provided, of course, that all you can be is a remorseless killing machine, a gun for hire in a brave new world where private armies are threatening to replace government-sponsored military forces.

As one of the Army of Two, it's your job to tow the company line in hotspots such as Iraq and Afghanistan. This means killing terrorists aplenty, rescuing hostages, and hunting down information regarding a looming central threat. It would be standard third-person fare, more meat for the grinder as it were, if not for some interesting game mechanics and a conspiracy-based plotline that's ultimately quite intriguing.

Here, it's expected you'll act in concert with a partner, or die trying. Teammates must work in tandem to solve basic puzzles, gain access to new areas, and keep each other safe. More importantly, it's necessary to use a teammate strategically, moving him around the battlefield like a chess piece. This war, you see, requires a brain.

An "aggro" section tracks how aggressively a soldier is fighting. The more aggro, the more attention he'll draw to himself (and away from his partner). An aggressive soldier glows molten red and becomes a beacon for enemy fire. This allows his partner to proceed along a merry and destructive path relatively unmolested. An aggro meter tracks the aggression, and playing off this mechanic is crucial. The game sets up an endless series of concrete blocks, metal barricades, and the like which are used for cover, but that also require constant leapfrogging in order to flank out enemies.

Playing the game strategically offers some delightful rewards. It's great fun, say, to pin down a bunch of enemies by telling your teammate to stay put and in aggressive mode while you work your way around them, ultimately trapping the suckers in a crossfire. This keeps the battles, which are fairly non-stop, fresh and engaging.

To be sure, Army of Two has its dumb, awkward, and just plain odd moments. When it becomes necessary for an A.I.-controlled teammate to yank your injured soldier to safety in order to heal him, it's a coin flip as to whether he'll do just that or drag you (in fine, meandering fashion) into a hail of bullets. And you'll probably be able to do without enemies who need to be dispatched with shots to their backs. It seems almost patently ridiculous that anyone, man or superman, could survive a merciless hail of gunfire to the head—even if it strikes an enemy's well-armored front.

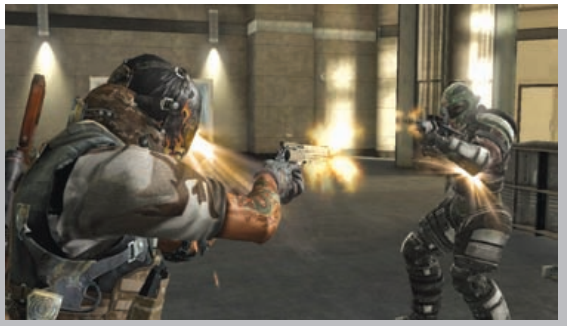
Rapper Rob Bass was indeed correct when he suggested it takes two to make a thing go right. In fact, it takes two to make them out of sight. Almost.

Army of Two — score 8.0

+	A neat cooperative play system; lots of frenzied battles
–	Computer A.I. wins no awards for intelligence, artificial or otherwise; boss battles are oftentimes stupid

System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Developer	EA Montreal
Publisher	Electronic Arts
Online/Multi	1-2
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March

"As one of the Army of Two, it's your job to tow the company line in hotspots such as Iraq and Afghanistan."



Try aiming for the face.

VIKING

Battle for Asgard

Thank the gods

words Dave Halverson

There's been ample coverage of Sega's latest potential über franchise but little has been established about the game's infrastructure and overall flow. Seldom have I been so surprised by a review disc. Judging by what I'd seen prior (Sega wisely kept a tight lid on early code), I was expecting a linear action/adventure similar to Beowulf—which done right would certainly be welcome given the universe (they had me at Midgard), but I never dreamt that Viking would offer up an epic more along the lines of Fable.

Having escaped the clutches of death to fight again, our champion, Skarin, is tasked with keeping Hel and her army of undead Vikings from stealing the souls of Asgard's youth to create her own hellish Valhalla. While Striking out on your own, the game's blueprint unfurls among one of the most gorgeous open-world landscapes ever seen. Where Fable was mostly relegated to trails, you can cut across a given expanse in Viking similar to what Fable 2 offers, and they are stunning to behold. Rolling seas, thick forests, endless flora, and stunning architecture abound among a wonderfully shaped landscape. Cliff faces, mountains, valleys, caves…Viking's is an incredibly rich and diverse world.

As Skarin liberates warriors they join his ranks, so initially each area begins with a series of recon missions, freeing warriors and obtaining gold and items. Depending on the size of the invading force and topography, no two missions are alike. Where Viking strays from the typical action/rpg formula is in the play mechanics. Aside from the usual ranged and melee combat (both of which are handled brilliantly and bathed in blood and flying appendages), Viking offers up a lion's share of climbing and platforming acrobatics…along with a most unexpected third element.

Once you sound the Battle Horn, it's on.

Once you've liberated a given area's captives, they will assemble adjacent that area's stronghold and await Sarik's orders to attack, triggering a Kingdom Under Fire-type massive battle where hundreds of opponents clash in real-time. Given that the game already offers a bounty of gameplay and never loads, this is most unexpected, especially on such a grand scale. And since the size of the armies grows with the game, well, you can imagine the rest…now add dragons. There's also an ample supply of magic, item, and character

"Striking out on your own, the game's blueprint unfurls among one of the most gorgeous open-world landscapes ever seen."

management involved making this one of the most feature-rich adventures of its kind. Each stronghold houses a Leystone allowing Skarin to warp back to the village hub and replenish his supplies (as well as jet back to any location after death). Once you've collected the game's core items—fire, ice, and thunder elements; the Eye of Asgard and Rage Crystals—found gold can be used to purchase items or to buy runes to attain greater control over the elements or exchange for combat moves. Exploration reaps great rewards.

Moreover and most importantly, however—and this is rare—is Creative Assembly's eye for detail. A disconnect between the player and Sarik could easily sully all of the above, and so they've wisely taken the time to go beyond dynamic collision and actually tailor specific animation to Skarin's every move. Besides cadence changes on every slope and incredibly adroit jumping and grappling animation (especially for such a large man), the way Sarik automatically begins to creep whenever he senses an enemy is simply brilliant. In fact I think this may be the first time anyone has used character animation as an early warning system. I'm now a Creative Assembly super fan. Easy to manage hot keys, intuitive controls, a great map that doubles as an objective outline…everything here is spot on. If this one doesn't launch a major franchise, then there's absolutely positively no justice in this world or Valhalla.

Viking: Battle for Asgard

score 9.5

+	Fable with Vikings meets Kingdom Under Fire, only it's prettier and far better tuned than either
–	Almost too comprehensive, but I get why

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Creative Assembly
Publisher	Sega of America
Online/Multi	All the money's in the game for once!
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March 25

"Moreover and most importantly, however—and this is rare—is Creative Assembly's eye for detail."

Below: Quick time, Viking style.

SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1

The best arcade collection ever, part 1

words Dave Halverson

"...we would have paid in excess of $6400 for this collection, which you can now buy for less than the sales tax."

How they Measure Up.

01. Shock Troopers
Ikari Warriors on steroids. . . one hot new shooter. You won't be able to wipe the smile from your face.

02. Top Hunter
2D multi-plane, body-slamming, mech-assaulting, platforming action bliss.

03. Magician Lord
Hard to beat even with unlimited continues but to this day a strikingly beautiful side scroller in need of a proper sequel.

04. Last Resort
Hand-drawn 2D shooting of nearly the highest order. Geo has a couple that beat it. Maybe next time.

05. Metal Slug
The original heavy-metal actioner that began it all. Now serving number 7!

06. Baseball Stars 2
Still the best baseball game there is if you ask me.

07. Fatal Fury
The 2D fighter that almost gave Street Fighter a run for its money.

08. Sengoku
Side scrolling East-meets-West kung-fu action.

09. Samurai Shodown
My personal favorite SNK fighting franchise.

10. King of the Monsters
Big Monsters; little city. Go smash 'em up.

11. Burning Fight
Quality 2D brawler, not quite Mutation Nation or Robo Army but p-cool.

12. Art of Fighting
Another quality SNK fighter.

13. King of Fighters '94
Ditto

14. World Heroes
Ditto

15. Neo Turf Masters
The second best Gold game on the Neo Geo

16. Super Sidekicks 3
Er. . . Soccer. Me no like.

The 46-Mega shock that never grows old!

I actually got my start in the Import Mail Order business. A huge fan of Japanese games, I got fed up with getting burned by the greedy game traders of the time ($100 for Mega Drive E Swat?) and started Die Hard Game Club with 5k, a $600-a-month shoebox in a dilapidated strip mall and a trip to little Tokyo to buy my first inventory. The rest as they say is history. We took over the business inside of three months. Back then Neo Geo games were the Holy Grail. My customers would beg, borrow, steal, sell everything or even volunteer for human experimentation (true story) to get enough cash for the massively Mega-charged $400 cartridges. They'd all show up the morning the games cleared customs and sit on the floor until the boxes arrived, eager to spend their rent money for a single, often less-than-one-hour-long game. Fast forward 17 years and SNK Arcade Classics means a lot more to me and all of those Die Hard gamers than to the average gamer. All totaled we would have paid in excess of $6400 for this collection, which you can now buy for less than the sales tax—$15. I think it's safe to say that The Orange Box is no longer the greatest value in gaming. Magician Lord, Last Resort, Top Hunter, and Metal Slug alone make this an INSANE value, but Shock Troopers has never even been available stateside. That's just crazy. What's missing? Plenty. Might as well place my order…Blues Journey, Cyber Lip, Nam 1975, 2020 Super Baseball, Eight Man, Mutation Nation, Double Dragon, Pulstar, Voltage Fighter Gowkaiser, Ninja Combat, Ninja Commando, Robo Army, Ganryu, Iron Clad, Neo Drift Out, Nightmare in the Dark, Prehistoric Isle 2, Ragnagard, Super Dodge Ball, Galaxy Fight and Spinmaster. I realize that some of these are third-party but something tells me that SNK can pull the necesary strings.

SNK Arcade Classics Vol. 1 — score 9.0

+	Some of the best arcade games of the golden age of coin ops, yours for a under $20
–	Some of the choices are obviously filler. Gotta have a Volume 2&3!

System(s)	PS2, PSP, Wii
Developer	SNK Playmore
Publisher	SNK Playmore USA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	Spring (PSP), Q4 (Wii)

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Super is an understatement

words Dave Halverson

If this doesn't make you smile, check for a pulse.

More so than any game since R.O.B. spun his first gyro, Super Smash Bros. Brawl has become the feel- good game in the Nintendo family. And regardless of whether you think it's the best playing, it's also the most nostalgic. Remember the feeling you got the first time you plugged in A Link to the Past, Donkey Kong Country, Super Metroid, Ocarina of Time, or Super Mario Galaxy? Brawl is like that…only better.

I've stayed away from this one since it was glimmers in Hal Laboratories' eye. I've seen a few screens and kept an eye on the cast, but otherwise it hasn't resonated with me as anything more than a showcase for the Wii's specs (and a much needed one at that) and, of course, more of the same only prettier and more voluminous. I've never been so happy to underestimate a game in my life. Brawl is of course of all of those things. It's hands down the best looking game on the Wii; the group and solo fighting is brilliantly nuanced and packed with trademark Nintendo characteristics and the choice of controller configurations runs the gamut: Wiimote, Wiimote & Nunchuk, GameCube pad, Wii pad… You'd think you were at Burger King.

Under the Group heading in "Brawl" you can battle up to three human or CPU opponents; "Rotation" lets up to 16 players switch off in a group challenge, "Tourney" allows 32 players to fight it out, and you can customize the rules in "Special Brawl" until the cows come home. Solo play is equally well rounded whether you choose Classic, Stadium (mini games), Training, or—and I'm still pinching myself—"Adventure Mode: The Subspace Emissary," which makes me so happy I could fart sunshine. There's a full-blown 3D side-scrolling action platformer in here! Not some clunky afterthought but a fast-paced, beautifully made full-length action game. Do you know how long I've waited

to see and play a modern Kid Icarus, Zero Suit Samus, Ike, Starfox, Zelda (and on and on) in 2D? Let alone a gorgeous, brilliantly executed arcade-style actioner complete with cut scenes and superb gameplay. Not that it's high-concept, just an amazingly intuitive traditional action game in the vein of those great arcade games of old, only 100 times prettier. I'd easily pay the full price for this mode alone, but luckily I don't have to.

Back to the brawling, each character has his or her own select arsenal of moves in accord with an extremely user-friendly control scheme—two attack buttons (standard and strong), a throw, jump, and shield, leaving the strategy in the execution. Ancillary maneuvers such as evading, dashing, specials, and edge climbing are also intuitive but require deft execution and picking up items is nearly as tricky as utilizing them. Like the previous game, Brawl is an easy (and insanely fun) to play, difficult to master game that's next to impossible to put down or grow weary of. It's another first-party Nintendo game that radiates superiority.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl is everything it was stacked up to be. The screens we've all been ogling—that's the Wii alright, doing its thing. The character models and animation are absolutely superb, the backgrounds seamless works of art and the gameplay easily the most diverse and enduring of any "fighting" game to date. I wouldn't even classify it as a fighter. This is an action masterpiece.

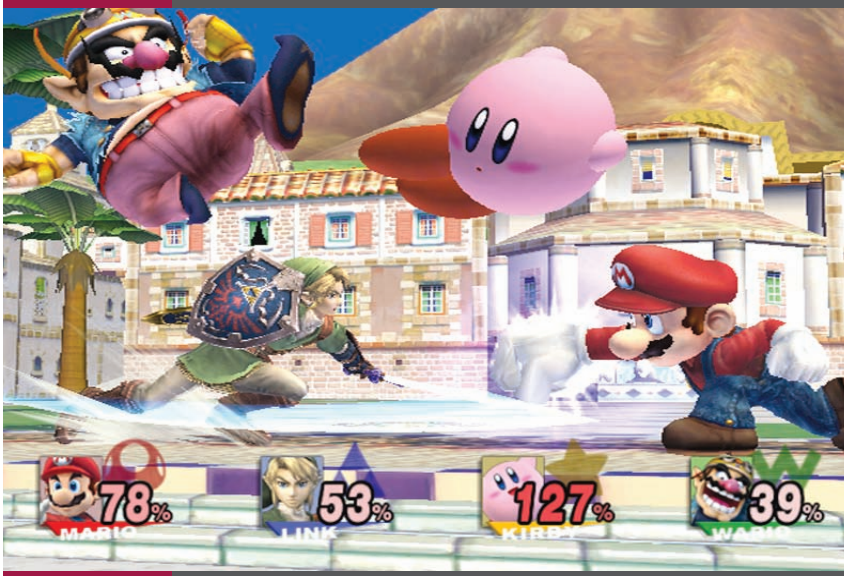
Super Smash Bros. Brawl score **10**

+	SSMB truly has it all...and more. Graphics, modes, gameplay, art, music. . .all superb. Fighting doesn't get any better in my book.
–	I'm sure someone somewhere will think of something bad to say.

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	HAL Laboratories
Publisher	Ninendo
Online/Multi	1-4 players co-op or online
ESRB Rating	T
Available	March 9

Finally—Kid Icarus. We missed you dude!

"Super Smash Bros. Brawl is everything it was stacked up to be. The screens we've all been ogling—that's the Wii alright, doing its thing."



Castle of Shikigami III

score 7.0

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. . .of killing aliens

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Alfa System	**Available**	April 15
Publisher	Aksys	**ESRB Rating**	T

Chances are if you're reading this review that you're already sold on Castle of Shikigami III. I mean, it's plain to see what's in store. Based on the Taito Type Xarcade system, this 2005 thoroughbred top-down polygonal shooter is the kind of games we've seen and played dozens of times on Genesis, SNES, Saturn, PlayStation, and in the arcade. CoSIII actually got its console start on the 360 in Japan. What makes or breaks a shooter of this ilk is fivefold: first you must have a compelling cast, which CoSIII does with its anime-based characters who actually weave a nice little story within each scenario. Next you need weapons that can get the job done. Here again CoSIII delivers with a main attack and choice of two sub weapons for each character, so there's truly a system for everybody. Of course you need a hook too, which in this case comes via close-proximity multipliers. The closer you are to an enemy's fire the more powerful your shots, and the closer to the enemy the higher the score, so CoSIII rewards you for flying by the seat of your pants. On the visual the game looks good—not great, but good. The camera work, however, is great providing a real sense of speed and horizon shifting. The character animation and bosses are also great. There's even a Dramatic Change Mode that lets you switch between two characters at any time (very handy!) and there's plenty of rewards to open up should you succeed in your mission. Which brings me to my final point...CoSIII is HARD. Level 1 and 2, not so bad…but by level 3, well, get ready to memorize some sick patterns on a moving grid. If you like it old school, only updated—the game controls nicely holding the Wiimote sideways—do not hesitate to lock and load. 360 version please!

The special effects hit strong and often!

WWII Aces

score 2.0

The game is the bomb

words Heather Campbell

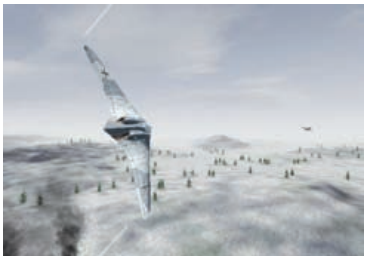
System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	1-4
Developer	Arcade Moon	**Available**	March
Publisher	Destineer	**ESRB Rating**	T

Take "control" of a plane from the Royal Air Force, Soviet Air Force, or the Luftwaffe, using your Wiimote and nunchuck (or alternately, the Wiimote alone). Fly over ridiculously simplistic model cities and bomb them. Head towards the next target over a stretch of featureless landscape—it could be grass, but the detail is turned down so low that it could also be a large carpet. When you're not bombing tiny buildings or boats, you can also dogfight with the enemy. Or fly through those extremely accurate 1940s air-rings. You know: the kind that disappeared when Nazi planes passed through them. Mission accomplished!

The levels are unorganized, ugly, and totally unsatisfying. Your plane takes a huge amount of damage, and controls unintuitively. You can split this game with a friend, but there are much, much better ways to waste time on your Wii.

"...it could be grass, but the detail is turned down so low that it could also be a large carpet."

Bombs away!



Fifa Street 3

score 6.5

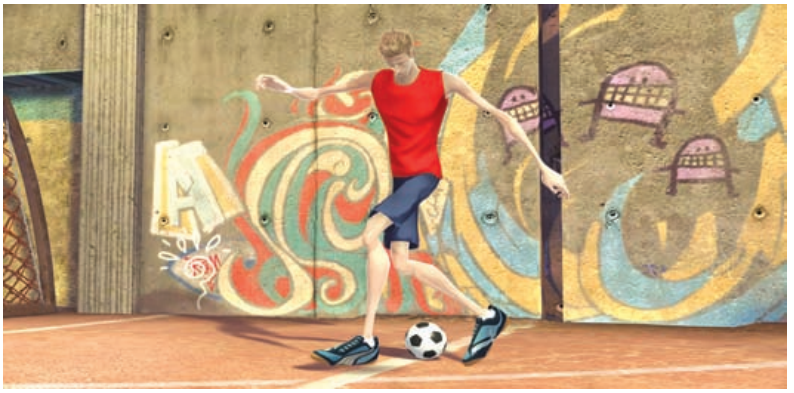
Score

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3	**Multi**	1-8
Developer	EA Canada	**Available**	February
Publisher	EA	**ESRB Rating**	E

Fifa Street 3's biggest blunder may not even be that big of a deal to some gamers. It's essentially an extension of an arcade-style of play, right, so do you really need to worry that much about tons of options and modes and customizations to feel satisfied? I say "no," but the fact is, most people love their side servings just as much as the main course, and you have to be aware going in that a few hours at best is about all you need to get your fill of Fifa Street 3.

Bring in a friend, of course, and this is where the Street games, like most games of their kind, have always been the reason to play, and here Fifa Street 3 dolls out the occasional exciting match worth the effort it takes to learn the finer points of the mechanics. Just how finely handled those finer points are is going to get a big thumbs down from the seasoned sports gamer and a more passing grade from the casual guy who might be new to the series. The Gamebreaker feature continues to be less of an appealing option, artificially manipulating the skill of play to a frustrating degree, and the command of the ball in general plays too loose and sporadic. I'm totally open to a game like this working off a solid simplicity, but ultimately Fifa Street 3 isn't strong enough at its core to keep the reward of play on a fever pitch. Too bad, because EA really nailed the style this time out.



Mana Khemia: Alchemists of Al-Revis

score 7.0

Another intriguing recipe.

words Eric L. Patterson

System(s)	PS2	**Multi**	NA
Developer	GUST	**Available**	March 2008
Publisher	NIS America	**ESRB Rating**	E 10+

Change; it is the thing we Americans all want from our presidential candidates, yet it is a heated topic when it comes to our video games. Some fight the idea of change, while others command that titles and genres evolve or die.

While the changes GUST introduces in Mana Khemia over its sibling series Atelier Iris aren't quite as extreme as I'd like to see, the differences that are present are a change for the better. Gameplay wise, it's only a few tweaks away from Iris 3–and really, GUST, this engine should not have the slowdown it does at this point–but in moving the setting from "random fantasy town" to centering around life at Al-Revis Academy, a wonderful feeling of freshness has been infused into the adventure. Honestly, I know that Mana's classes and homework are the same things I was doing before as "missions," but that simple shift in how we perceive those activities makes them much more engrossing. I'm also glad to see a renewed importance put on the actual element of item creation through alchemy; basing character advancement on recipe synthesis instead of traditional leveling, for example, is exactly what this series needed.

It is a shame, then, that Mana Khemia's gameplay is burdened with a cast of characters that are irritatingly stereotypical and generic in both design and personality, to the point where you'll swear you've met the entire cast countless times before. As much as I enjoyed most of what Mana Khemia had to offer, actively disliking three of the game's main characters (Vayne, Jess, and Flay) made it easy to be apathetic every time a storyline cutscene kicked in.

Sprites meet sweet lighting effects; my kind of alchemy.

House of the Dead 2 & 3 Return

Time to die..again!

words Dave Halverson

What a rotten party.

When I first played House of the Dead on console, back when I paid too much for the Saturn version, I remember being frustrated over the choppy framerate and less-than spot-on arcade models... Sometime later, again plunking down some major cash, House of the Dead II on Dreamcast was a different story, offering up a picture-perfect translation. If you'd have told me back then that in 2008 (nine years later) I'd be able to buy both, arcade perfect, on a Nintendo console with a two-handed controller for under $30, I'd have definitely figured you for a loon. Yeah, and gas will be $4 a gallon...right.

Looking at it in those terms, it is peculiar that after nearly a decade these games are still viable. Given the influx of casual users drawn to gaming via the Wii, House of the Dead will likely find an entirely new audience and at the same time attract Sega die-hards hot on superior versions for such a great price, complete with extra difficulty levels and multiple control schemes (you can play with a friend or get your John Woo on and double-gun it).

For those new to the House of the Dead series (or anyone unlucky enough to have suffered through Uwe Boll's cavalcade of crap cinema and emerged confused), it's a pretty straightforward game. The precursor to games like Resident Evil, I suppose, it's best described as a motion-ride/shooter. As the camera guides you along a set path, zombies of all shapes and sizes attack in waves from every conceivable vantage point: your job...shoot em dead, then go buy the action figures...head shots highly recommended.

With the zombification of Earth at hand it's up to us to wield a plastic gun and save the world. Of course we failed miserably: House of the Dead III opens in the year

"Given the influx of casual users drawn to gaming via the Wii, House of the Dead will likely find an entirely new audience and at the same time attract Sega die-hards hot on superior versions for such a great price."

2019, years after the planet has become infested with the undead.

Here's my question: If you're going to do House of the Dead 1&2 why not Daytona USA 1 and especially 2? And while you're at it...Power Drift, Outrun 2, Harley Davidson LA Riders, Wild Riders, Lost World Jurassic Park, Sonic & Tails Spinner, and Ghost Squad? At $30 a pair, turning my Wii into a Sega coin-op depository sounds like the best idea since the two-fisted controller!

House of the Dead 2 & 3 Return — score **7.0**

+	Shoot zombies to your heart's content for a low-low price...at home...eating a taco!
–	That's all you do.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Sega
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March 11

ObsCure: The Aftermath

score 7.5

Can you survive the horror?

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Wii	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Hydravision	**Available**	March 25
Publisher	Igntion Ent.	**ESRB Rating**	M

Obscure: The Aftermath is immediately intriguing—a survival-horror game set in a college starring teen-movie stereotypes (including ObsCure 1 survivors Shannon and Kenny). As much as Obscure echoes games like Resident Evil and Silent Hill, it also manages to chart its own course through the bloody survival-horror waters. With teen-horror (and torture) movies being so popular (*Saw V* anyone?), it's kind of astounding that this is the first game to follow Hollywood's gory lead. Taking place two years after the events of the first game, Aftermath follows six all-new victims, two of which can be controlled in tandem (single player co-op!), utilizing their diverse skill sets as you negotiate the game's myriad scenarios, searching for clues and solving riddles as you delve into the twisted events surrounding a drug created from a strange flower spreading throughout the University. It all ties into the original, so just take my word for it... horticulture has never been so fatal.

Aside from the usual array of grotesque creatures and taut set pieces, it doesn't hurt having the likes of The Boston String Quartet and the Paris Opera Children's Choir providing the chilling soundtrack either. All things considered, however, the disposable nature of the protagonists is still the game's coolest calling card. As terrifying as Silent Hill is, you're fairly certain you're going to live through it. Not so here...and gender discrimination is not on the menu.

It's also nice to see games like Obscure: The Aftermath popping up on Wii. Casual gamers can't have all the fun. So if you're looking for some bone-chilling survival horror that's a horse of a different color, tuition is only $29.99!

He's at the 10...

Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

score 5.0

Been here, done this...

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Xbox 360/PS3	**Multi**	1-8
Developer	Spark	**Available**	February 28
Publisher	Codemasters	**ESRB Rating**	T

If Turning Point: Fall of Liberty played as well as Halo 3, its murky, dull visuals might be better forgiven, but alas, the game struggle to even play as well as an average first-person shooter. The technical shortcomings too often go beyond a disappointing aesthetic, effectively harming gameplay and the ability to feel like you're getting off good, satisfying shots. Ideas are stronger than execution; falling bodies off a towering sky scraper while Nazi's destroy the surroundings in old-time New York sounds like a great scene, yet is more of a plodding yawn. Turning Point's theme of an alternate reality had some possibilities, but even within this fiction you just end up doing uninspired and overworked shootouts.

PixelJunk Monsters

score 9.0

A ruthlessly addictive war of strategy

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	PS3 (PSN)	**Multi**	1-2
Developer	Q Games	**Available**	February
Publisher	SCEA	**ESRB Rating**	E

What an absolute surprise this game has been! The pull of nostalgia can't be ignored; there's an infectious quality that grows and grows, a throwback to oldschool thinking that moves the gameplay: build weapon towers in tree-lined fields and watch them work to fend off an attacking army of little soldiers of nature. Somewhere on the map lies your house, where a group of baby turtles beg for your defense. The object is to collect coins and gems to keep your arsenal slowly growing, while camping out in key locations to power up what's already built and prepare for the next wave of creatures. The look is so sharp and appealing in HD, but you really have to appreciate PixelJunk Monsters even more for a style that feels so removed from the norm.

I've had so much fun plotting strategies with a friend working another character on the same field, it's almost become an obsession to master PixelJunk Monsters and advance our scores. It's been a long time since I've felt that.

Sega Superstar Tennis

Now serving...

words Dave Halverson

"This is a one-way ticket to triple-A town, a sports game done right..."

brand-endemic sports is one trend that I can't get enough of, especially when it's done right. What games like Mario Strikers have done for Nintendo, Sega Super Star Tennis will do (or should do) for Sega. This is a one-way ticket to triple-A town, a sports game done right, and then taken to the extreme that each embedded universe brings via challenges, minigames, online play (for 360 and PS3) and tournament play that leads to just deserts, such as opening the game's many secret locations and characters.

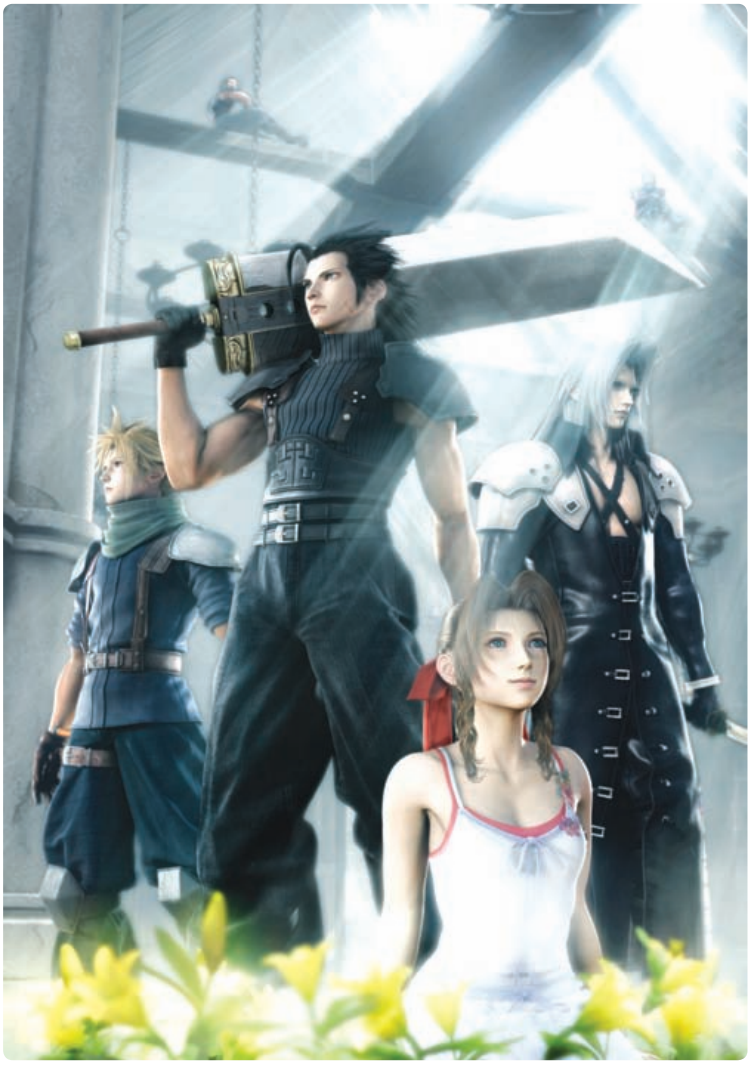
Depending on the universe you select you get a court (never saw that coming I bet), only in lieu of the usual grandstands Sega surrounds each venue with a massive world teeming with all manner of meticulously modeled analogous bells and whistles. The Jet Set Radio court for instance features massive animating amplifiers, everyone's favorite underground DJ Professor K spinning records, the local riot police, and the series' unforgettable Shibuya-cho square. House of the Dead, Golden Axe, Space Channel 5, Samba de Amigo, Sonic, Monkey Ball and a bunch of TBD courts are all sparkling examples of Sega's wonderful contributions to our industry. Other than playing great, through singles play or single or multiplayer player doubles matches—Sega's rich tennis background puts them way ahead of the curve—what makes SST sparkle are the specials. Once your character reaches critical mass and his, her, or its star begins flashing, you're just a shoulder button away from sending your opponent into a cornucopia of disorienting mayhem. Playing as Ulala, for instance, each return is accompanied by a downpour of Morolians; playing as Beat or Gum, riot police rush across the court, and as Dr. Eggman, spiked balls come hurling over the net. The ball is in there (somewhere), only either darting around or within a sea of stuff. Two cameras—one bird's-eye and one court level—are employed for your volleying pleasure and, well, other than that it's all about enjoying all of your Sega buddies as you've never imagined in glorious HD. For me personally seeing the Jet Set franchise in any capacity reignites my undying love for the series and keeps my dream of a third game alive...on life support, yeah, but breathing nevertheless. There's more than enough here to luv for Sega fans big and small.

Sega Superstar Tennis score 8.5

+	Excellent gameplay in Sega tennis tradition, sparkling visuals on 360 and PS3, replayability galore
–	Certain characters could be designed better; key Sega brands MIA such as Astal, Gunvalkyrie, Ristar, Comix Zone, Oasis, Gunstar, Landstalker, and so on...yet we get Monkey Ball? Sequel is needed STAT. No Treasure games! Bah!

System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3, Wii, PS2
Developer	Sumo Digital
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	360 and PS3 only
ESRB Rating	E
Available	March 21

Who wants Gum?
I do!!



Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

The only crisis would be passing it up

words Heather Campbell

Last month, Nick Des Barres gave Play a thrilling preview of Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core. Calling the game "console-quality gaming in the palm of your hand," he promised that it would be the best part *yet* of the Compilation of Final Fantasy VII.

Well kids, I come here today to confirm what Mr. Des Barres has set forth. Crisis Core is a full, complete, dignified game. It's one of the few times in my life that I have played a portable title and lost touch with its material presence in my hands. Wrapped up in the presentation, engaged by the story, and startled by the music, I found myself playing a big game that just happened to be on a tiny screen. It's so good that I wanted to get a PSP Slim just to be able to plug the bugger into my television at home—to anchor myself on my couch for a more robust experience.

Crisis Core has been a system-seller in Japan. I hope it works the same way here. I mean, I already have a PSP and am considering buying a new one because of this game. That's quality, man.

So, what's so good about it? Well, the combat system immediately comes to mind. Sitting somewhere in-between real-time and active-time, the actions you select experience a slight delay before their implementation. Like a hyper-fast version of the turn-based systems of old, Crisis Core's semi-action conveys more literally the sort of combat that ATB is supposed to represent. Imagine you're playing FFVII, but the characters have all been quadruple hasted. Now toss in the ability to dodge attacks, or defend at the press of a button. Get the idea? Squeeze in deluxe, Materia-based customizability, and you've got pleasantly unique, deep, and playful fight sequences.

Now, add a healthy dose of style and beauty to the combat. Couple that with instant, high-end (skippable!) CG for the attacks of your summons. Crisis Core is vibrant, sharp, and detailed. The story, the voice acting—I feel like I can't quite be effusive enough. Sometimes the world can get a little dreary, and the seriousness with which it handles itself is laughably grave, but I'd rather play a game that's a too melodramatic than one that hasn't the courage to really be what it wants to be.

Here's the thing: whenever I play portable games, I get the sense that they're stripped down, or slightly behind the times. If I'm at home, I think, "There's a game on my shelf that could do this better." Crisis Core isn't a game like that. It's modern, and that's magical.

Another stellar FF combat system.

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII	score 9.0
+	Presentation, Polish, Combat Systems, Music
–	Man, what if this had been an original IP?

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	March 25, 2008

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God of War
Chains of Olympus

Portable and no less ferocious

"...anything less on PSP is asking for trouble..."

words Brady Fiechter

had God of War: Chains of Olympus not begun to lose focus at the end and rely too much on recycled ideas, this unrivaled PSP game would be a contender to one-up last year's awesome God of War 2. Confidently passed on to Daxter-developer Ready at Dawn while original series creator Sony Santa Monica stick to console, the God of War template is firmly intact, but it's the subtle sensibilities of these fresh creators that make Chains of Olympus an even more rounded success. It's not like that much has really changed fundamentally—a few added magic attacks are nifty but insubstantial—but there are enough stylistic flourishes and design choices that mark the game as something uniquely transformative for a Kratos adventure.

God of War has gracefully pushed the PS2 to its limit in the past, so anything less on PSP is asking for trouble in the most obnoxious of gaming circles. No trouble here. There is not a moment in the presentation of Chains of Olympus that disappoints, there is maybe no better tech on the PSP. Add to the benchmark coding job an impressive level of artistry behind the Greek-mythology inspirations and you get a landscape both gorgeous and highly spirited. Credit a sweeping musical score for further layering on the thick mood.

Comparing God of War on console to this first attempt on PSP takes some delicate separation. It's unfair to get overly critical of the loss of dual-analog, but the fact is, I simply could not come to grips with dodging with both trigger buttons and "circle." So it is with a system that never works for the shape of my hands, but nothing is perfect, and with that in mind, it would be regrettable to imagine any God of War fan missing this. Or any fan of action games, because playing Chains of Olympus only furthers my opinion that there is no character in the genre as expressively felt as Kratos and his vicious blades.

God of War Chains of Olympus score **9.0**

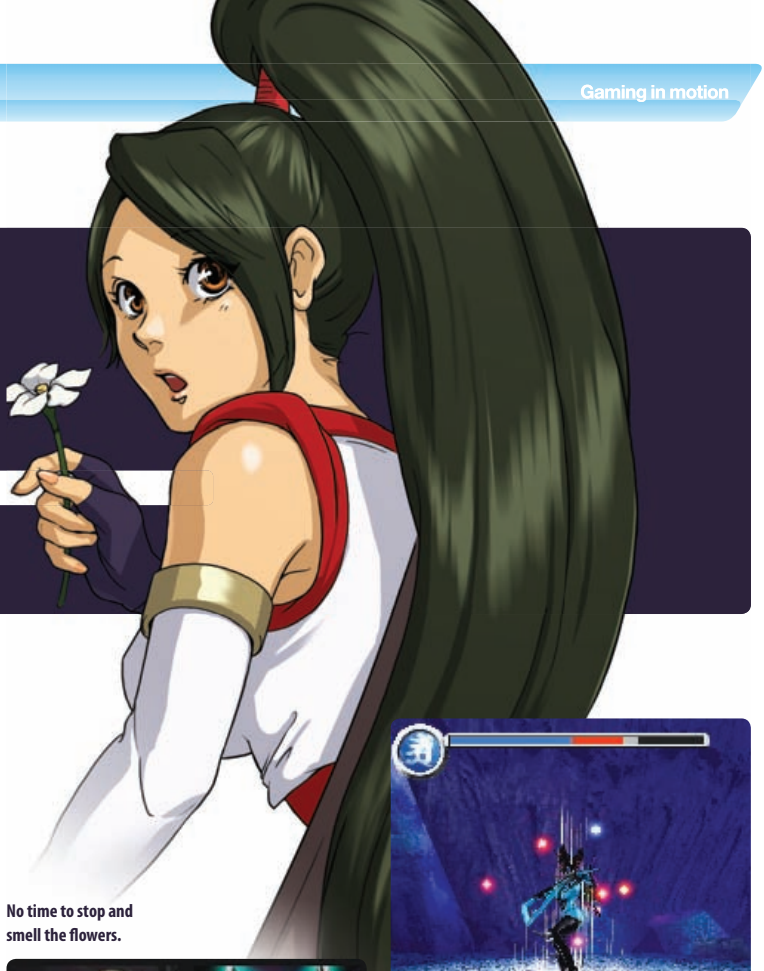
+	PSP at its best, continuing the console GoW greatness
–	I never felt comfortable with the trigger-dodging; some laborious puzzles

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Ready At Dawn
Publisher	SCEA
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	M
Available	March

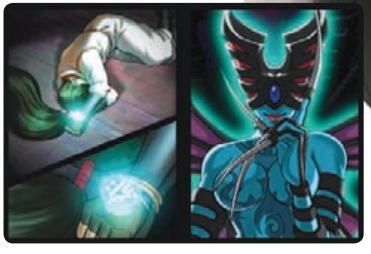
Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword

The Stylus is your blade

words Dave Halverson



I'd like to begin by saying that when Ninja Gaiden was announced for the DS this isn't at all what I had in mind. My mind immediately rewound to 1989, sitting for days memorizing pattern after pattern (and loving every minute of it) of the original Ninja Gaiden. A current generation 2D Ninja Gaiden would be an answer to my prayers, but that's so…yesterday. I should have known that team Ninja would choose to innovate rather than retrace their steps, which they have, and in the process created the single most beautiful DS game to date. Holding the DS vertically, as if you're about to embark on an interactive manga, you pretty much are. One thing Itagaki has brought back is the hand-drawn still-frame cinemas that graced the series' 8-bit run, only ratcheted up to current standards with spectacular results. The gameplay however is another story—entirely new, completely stylus driven, and based in the current mythology. The prize is once again the Dragon Sword, the dragon lineage's most prized possession, forged by a dragon's fang to defeat the dark dragon. The peace that came on the heels of Ryu's last great victory (six months prior in the series' chronology) has once again been shattered, his village ransacked, the sword stolen, and his beautiful training partner kidnapped (after we have the pleasure of controlling her through the game's real-time tutorial/preface). Enter Ryu, looking and animating so good that it's actually hard to believe. All of his movements—running, walking, platforming, slashing enemies, performing supers—are 100%stylus driven. You can play the entire game with one hand. Ninpo is triggered by tracing the Kanji, and then the element it invokes such as a massive fireball can also be guided. It's all very easy to grasp, but hard to master. The real skills come into play mastering techniques such as the Izuna Drop, where you must perfectly draw down, up, up, on the enemy at the right moment to trigger a brutal aerial body slam. Surrounded by multiple attackers on different planes the art of dodging, slashing, and tapping any ranged attackers becomes a symphony of eye/hand coordination…just like the old days, only sans the frustration of entire level do-overs. Save spots are conveniently located wherever extreme challenges wait, opening up the Ninja Gaiden universe to its widest demographic yet. The bosses are also completely epic, both in size and attack patterns. They're not as hard as the console game's, but they are extremely tactical and demand proper wielding of the stylus. To be completely honest I did find some subtle flaws and camera jamming fighting certain bosses. It's extremely tricky to get behind massive charging behemoths in a limited space using the stylus to navigate the circumference of a tight ring or area. The game does have its share of frustration, but it's a small price to pay for the game's visual payoff and overall über prowess. It's so beautiful—so far superior visually to anything on the DS—that it's the kind of game that makes it worth buying the system for. This one will move hardware, as if Nintendo needs to. The DS is the number one gaming platform on Earth. Innovative games like this, Phantom Hourglass, The World Ends with You, and so on are the reason why. Vive la Différence!



No time to stop and smell the flowers.

"...it's the kind of game that makes it worth buying the system for."

Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword — score 9.5

+	Story, graphics, music. . . perfection. Gameplay—near perfection
–	A few frustrating moments via the all-stylus mechanics

System(s)	NDS
Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Tecmo
Online/Multi	1 player
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	March

Rondo of Swords

score 8.0

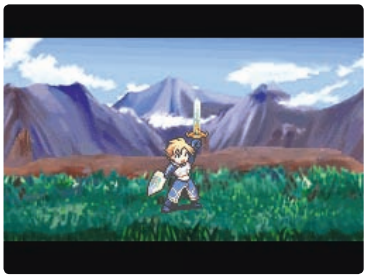
System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1 player
Developer	SUCCESS / Fun Unit	**Available**	April 2008
Publisher	Atlus	**ESRB Rating**	E

tell me if you've heard this one before: a young prince is thrust from his kingdom due to invasion by a neighboring army, and after going on the run as a refugee, he must bring together a ragtag group of warriors in order to reclaim his land and his throne.

Let's be honest: how many strategy RPGs do you really play for the story? Interesting characters and engrossing combat are what we crave, both of which Rondo of Swords provides plenty of. Well supported by a stellar (and often funny) English translation, it's easy to connect with Rondo's cast of heroes and villains, from the conversations they have with one another during missions, to each character's beautiful sprite artwork that comes to life while performing actions in battle.

Ah, battle... for it is here that the true potential of this title shines brightest. SUCCESS has done away with a number of SRPG traditions in Rondo, most notably in tossing the usual method of engaging in combat for the "Route Maneuver System." Opposing units are now attacked by having your character chart a path that intersects them, meaning with some careful planning and a bit of luck, a lone unit can slice through multiple foes like a hot knife through butter.

Not only does this provide for a fresh, faster-paced new slant on combat, but also an added element of danger. It's easy to get swept up in the action, only to find all of your party members separated and vulnerable; and trust me, many of the missions are already challenging enough without the punishment Rondo loves to hand out at moments like that. **Eric L. Patterson**



Final Fantasy: Ring of Fates

score 8.0

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	1-4
Developer	Square Enix	**Available**	March 11
Publisher	Square Enix	**ESRB Rating**	E

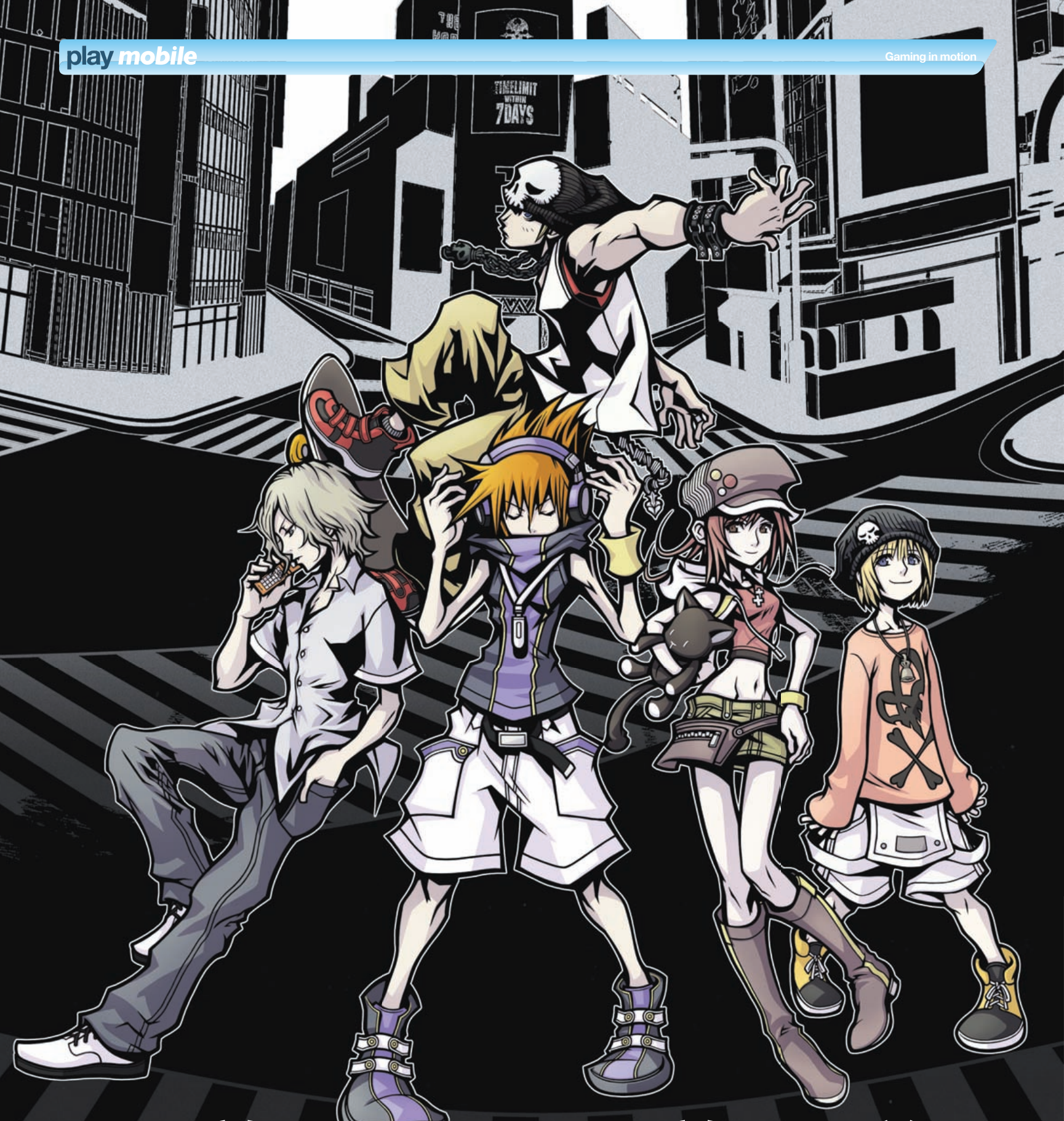
I was not a fan of the original Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles on GameCube. Reportedly made only as a contractual obligation—a requirement of Square Enix's GameBoy Advance developer license—the original CC was an empty, if pretty, exercise in how not to use your core game engine. Happily, FF CC: Ring of Fates rights that wrong... through the careful application of story.

CC on the 'Cube had a wonderful gameplay toolset, but nothing much to do with it. With only the barest of plot threads to tie the action together, it was a blast four player, but a chore alone—Phantasy Star Online without a net connection. Ring of Fates retains the rip-roarin' multiplayer, but is equally effective as a solo RPG, thanks to a quintessentially J-RPG one-player story. It isn't very Final Fantasy–you play as a pair of very young twins who grow into young adults over the course of the game, rather than an androgynously beautiful superman–but thoroughly satisfying on a small, handheld scale.

The gameplay is almost entirely real-time action, with the ability to jump and lift objects and enemies. Most special attacks, magic and item use happens via the DS's bottom screen, and this panoply of control options can sometimes be confusing in the heat of battle—my only major complaint about the game.

If you're a J-RPG/action RPG fan, you really can't go wrong with $39 spent on Ring of Fates. It's beautiful, fairly lengthly, charmingly traditional, and just might be Square Enix's best original Nintendo DS game yet. **Nick DesBarres**

"Ring of Fates retains the rip-roarin' multiplayer, but is equally effective as a solo RPG."



The World Ends With You

Once upon a time in Shibuya···

words Dave Halverson

If I was asked to cite one game that defines the NDS experience it would be The World Ends With You. No way this game gets made on console, and what a shame it would be if the spirit of true innovation was quelled during this vital turning point in gaming culture. Developed by the Kingdom Hearts team and Jupiter with character designs by Tetsuya Nomura and Gen Kobayashi (applause sign flashes), inspired by the aesthetics of Shibuya youth culture, it doesn't get any more avant-garde, J-pop-vogue than this.

You play as Neku Sakuraba, a music and graffiti addict with a devil-may-care attitude who wakes up one day to find himself in a strange alternate Shibuya district where not only can he read everyone's thoughts but is invisible to *almost* everybody. The only people who can see him are other participants in the "Shinigami game." Before he can wrap his mind around any of this, however, he receives a text message; "Reach 104.Time limit 60 minutes. If you do not achieve your goal, you will die. From the Shinigami." Flipping over his hand he notices a timer embedded on his palm…60 minutes and counting. Around this time a beautiful teenage girl Shiki Misaki appears who's also been drawn into the game. Shiki asks Neku if they can join up to which Neku reluctantly agrees… Let the game begin.

Here's how it works… The Shinigami invite the participants—there are other teams in the area as well—on various tasks, most of which require they clear a given area of the "Noise," physical manifestations of people's negative thoughts and feelings that appear as mutated animals such as frogs, wolves, and so on… Their spirits are floating all around them but can only be seen in a transcendental state. So Neku must use his psychic skills to read peoples' thoughts to gather clues and eliminate the Noise, keeping them from reaching their goal, because failure is not an option. Fail in the game and you're erased. Sound weird? Oh it's weird…but what a great game it makes. Tapping on the Noise brings up a dual screen with Shiki on the top and Neku on the bottom. You can choose to have Shiki fight on Auto, which I recommend, or attempt controlling her attacks with the D-pad while you go through the many motions once engaged in battle. The entire game revolves around pins. You begin with a single skull pin that allows you to slash but as you defeat The Noise they drop more and more…Shockwave, Psychokinesis, Cure drink, Force rounds, Poison bones, Ice blow, Thunderbolt, Pyrokinesis… at first you can equip only two but as you assail in rank you can take up to six into battle, each of which has a special power linked to a stylus move, swiping, tapping, dragging, slashing…you name it. Pins can be cashed in for money once mastered and are kept in decks which you can manipulate depending on the Noise in the area. Money is used to strengthen your characters, but not in the usual manner. This is Shibuya baby, it's all about fashion! So basically you're going around reading minds, solving riddles (lots of snappy dialogue), shopping, and fighting the Noise. That's The World Ends With You…God (who and/or whatever you are) bless Square Enix. What makes all of this so very insanely special is the character design and music. Never have I been placed in such a trance as this. Okay, well, maybe in JSRF (I think I have a thing for Shibuya), but the soundtrack is like pure audible heroin. I seriously doubt that it will ever leave my brain. As for the character design, well, have a look. If this doesn't float your boat, then you live in a dingy. See that 80ft. motor yacht about to run you down; that's me.

"...inspired by the aesthetics of Shibuya youth culture, it doesn't get any more avant-garde, J-pop-vogue than this."

Shiki's super clingy but who's complaining... besides Neku.

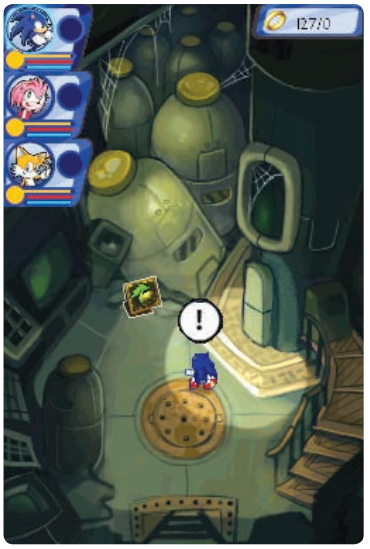
The World Ends With You preview

System(s)	NDS
Developer	Square Enix / Jupiter
Publisher	Square Enix
Available	April 22

The Dark Brotherhood

Once upon a time there was this Hedgehog…

words Dave Halverson



"There's nothing better than when Sega breathes new life into Sonic..."

I'd like to consider myself Sonic's number one fan in the press; in fact, I think it's pretty safe to say it's so. I loved Sonic the Hedgehog on 360 (PS3 is another matter)…Sonic Heroes, Sonic Adventure, Sonic CD, every 16-bit Sonic ('cept Spinball), Sonic Rush Adventure, Sonic Battle, Sonic R…and on and on. There's nothing better than when Sega breathes new life into Sonic, and so I have high hopes for Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood. That said…

Polygonal characters inhabiting pre-rendered or hand-drawn worlds is nothing new. We haven't seen much of it on console these days—it was more a staple on PlayStation—but it certainly was an effective tool back when precious memory was needed for other things, like characters and war machines. Most recently the method has found a new home on DS in games like Ninja Gaiden, where Itagaki-san has painted his latest masterpiece. Where Gaiden's backgrounds are pre-rendered, however, Sonic's are hand drawn in striking story-book fashion. The story gets underway when Sonic—on a two-year hiatus having beaten Dr. Eggman—learns that Knuckles and the Chaos Emeralds are missing. We don't know who took them—although this new Shade character looks mighty suspicious—but it's up to Sonic to get them back. Now, I'm no Shakespeare but right there…this is BioWare. Stolen Chaos Emeralds, really? Again? Moving to the gameplay, Sonic and company (up to 11 characters will join him along the way) scoot along familiar ground using collected rings to purchase special attacks, and fatigue points – earned by rhythmically tapping in battle—to selectively upgrade characters. Essentially BioWare is simply translating traditional role playing staples into the Sonic universe.

Nothing wrong with that though. To me it's all in the delivery. If the story is compelling (as compelling as a story about stolen Chaos Emeralds can be) and the gameplay is exciting and vibrant, then this could work, however, based on what I saw things have a very long way to go. The characters, being limited to the bottom screen (horizontally) appear very tiny. A vertical approach would have served the polygonal models better, or better yet using both screens, although BioWare explained to us that screen-to -screen transitions muck up the works. That hasn't been my experience but in this case I'm sure that they have their reasons. The one thing that really struck me as odd though is that they aren't allowing us to walk behind vertical elements in the isometric landscape. Rather than go transparent and make the world seem 3D we're made to walk around vertical elements as if the entire landscape is a flat painting. Imagine what this would have done to, say, FF VII. Elsewhere, the spirit of Sonic seems to be intact—the music from Sonic 2's Emerald Hill Zone made me happy—but otherwise I think that the way BioWare works, it's going to boil down to the final product. Nothing was nailed down in our demo so I don't want to pass any judgment; just opinion based on what I saw.

Here's a thought though… Note to Sega: I love BioWare as much as the next guy but they do science fiction right. There's a little company in Japan called Treasure that could give you a Sonic RPG that would go down in history for probably half the cost, so, whoever is pulling the strings, just please remember that name. Treasure helped make Sega what it is. It's also not a bad thing to get prefect 10s and rake in piles of currency either. Maybe you went with BioWare (whom again, I love) for their storytelling prowess but retrieving Chaos Emeralds? A new "dark" presence? Man, this is a road so well travelled it's closed for renovation. Who am I kidding though; it's Sega and BioWare. The odds are definitely stacked in our favor.

Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood — preview

System(s)	NDS
Developer	BioWare
Publisher	Sega of America
Available	Sept 2008

YEAR OF THE FIGHTER:

AOU 2008

words Nick Des Barres / Dai Kohama

Yes, There Are This Many Arcade Fighting Games In 2008:

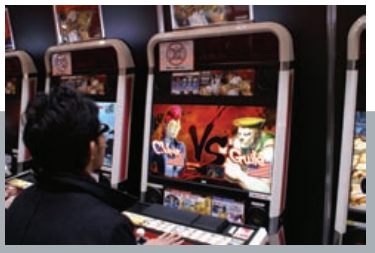
Akatsuki Blitzkampf – Subtle Style
Arcana Heart 2 – Examu
BlazBlue – Arc System Works
Fate/unlimited codes – Capcom
Gundam VS. Gundam – Namco Bandai
The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match – SNK Playmore
The King of Fighters XII – SNK Playmore
Melty Blood: Actress Again - Ecole
Monster: Ancient Cline - Examu
Samurai Spirits Sen – SNK Playmore
Sengoku Basara X – Capcom
Street Fighter IV – Capcom
Tekken 6 – Namco Bandai
Virtua Fighter 5 R - Sega

Something is very, very strange. I feel like Desmond in Episode 5 of this year's season of Lost: It's 1996, right? Fighting games are in their golden age, Capcom and SNK rule the arcades, competition is fierce, and the yearly Arcade Operator's Union show in Tokyo is chock-full of one-on-one duelfests for the coming season. I count no less than 14 hitting Japanese arcades this year, from all the usual suspects: Capcom and SNK, of course, but also Sega, Namco and Arc System Works. Right, gotta be 1996. We've got Street Fighter III on the horizon, Samurai Shodown IV, The King of Fighters '97...huh? What's going on here? It's 2008? No! I'm still a teenager! Your futuristic 21st century taunts of Street Fighter IV, Samurai Spirits Sen and The King of Fighters XII are nothing but filthy lies!

And then the reality settles in: It really is 2008, and I'm pushing 30, but the arcade gaming industry at large seems desperate to give me back my halcyon days of youthful competitive gaming. Is it because of Street Fighter IV? Was an arcade revival anticipated for this year, or is it all just serendipity? How did such a stagnant scene become so completely rejuvenated, after a decade of decline? Questions for wiser men than I to ponder, but I'm more than happy to reap the benefits. AOU 2008 was the single most exciting trade show I've been to in years, an almost hallucinatory dream of two-player fisticuffs coming in the form of both beloved series, as well as all-new, potential franchise debuts.

But it's not *just* fighters: The entire *ge-sen* (arcade) scene is pulling itself together for its biggest year since the last millennium. We have 2-D shooters. We have driving games. We have new, upstart companies like Examu, and a console giant making their arcade debut in the form of Square Enix. For the first time in eons, actual games outnumbered prize and medal machines. Taken collectively, it can only mean one thing: The arcades are *back*–in Japan at least. Whether some of this bounty will invigorate American arcades as runoff is unknown, but in the meantime let **play** take you to where the action was: AOU 2008, an event that declared resoundingly that we live in the Year of the Fighter.

The line to wait for Street Fighter IV topped out at 120 minutes. There were no complaints.



Capcom

I've had a few months now to process the fact that we're getting a **Street Fighter IV**. Initial media had me cautiously optimistic, and as much as I would have appreciated a high-definition, hand-drawn 2-D revival, my adult self knows that such a thing would not be appropriate for the Street Fighter brand in 2008. All that *really* matters is how it plays, and after having spent a combined four hours in line to play a total of two matches of SFIV, I can tell you that it is perfectly and quintessentially Street Fighter. At the current juncture I might even hazard to say IV is a bit *too* Street Fighter, being for all intents and purposes a polygonal remake of Super Turbo. Then again, we've only seen two new characters (the select screen seemed to suggest ten more will be added to the current playable roster, which consisted of the base SFII characters along with newcomers Crimson Viper and Abel), and four minutes of play wasn't nearly enough to assess what impact the new Saving System and Ultra Combos will have on gameplay.

For the record, the Saving System is a four-part gauge found in the upper quadrant of the screen which fills as you take damage. Unleashed by pressing Fierce and Roundhouse together, it can be used for any number of techniques like the EX Specials from the III series, a new instant-stun move, and universal unblockables, any of which can be cancelled with a dash for combo creation. We barely got a chance to use it, and thus hesitate to comment, but we trust producer Yoshinori Ono with this massive addition to the core speed-chess gameplay of Street Fighter and look forward to in-depth analysis when SFIV is released in Japanese arcades this July.

Visually, the game simply must be seen in motion to be appreciated. It is as perfect a polygonal replica of classic Capcom sprites as one might imagine, thanks to incredible, exaggerated animation work on faces and limbs that can often look silly in still screens. The designers at Capcom seem determined to go against the reality of three-dimensional forms in space, torturing polygons frame by frame to produce the rapidly-deforming false perspective that was previously the sole domain of hand-drawn art. I can't think of any other 3-D game with this type of animation–nothing even in the ballpark–and it is truly a sight to behold. Before seeing SFIV in motion I was guardedly looking forward to it...now I'm contemplating forsaking food for a few months to buy the arcade board.

Capcom wasn't stopping with just Street Fighter IV, of course. Also on hand were two other fighters developed out of house, **Fate/unlimited codes** by Cavia/Eighting, and **Sengoku Basara X** by Arc System Works. Fate is based, on the hyper-popular adult game of the same name by Type-Moon, which has since spawned PS2 ports, manga, novels and anime. It looked rather impressive for a game running on PS2 hardware, and replicated the idiosyncratic look of the original perfectly in 3-D. Basara is a fully hand-drawn affair based on Capcom's own Dynasty Warriors-lite PS2 series, the first installment of which saw American release as Devil Kings. Both were admirable works, and had SFIV not been looming over them like a behemoth, would probably have drawn far more attention.

STREET FIGHTER 4

A moment I thought would never arrive.

SNK Playmore

SNK Playmore was every inch the equal to storied rival Capcom this year, beginning with the fully playable, grounds-up Samurai series revival **Samurai Spirits Sen**. Running on Taito's Type X2 board like Street Fighter IV, Sen might not have looked quite as gorgeous as Capcom's comeback, but made up for it with an adventurous game system (more Soulcalibur than Samurai) and 12 all-new characters joining a returning 12. The game is truly a reimagining rather than a straight sequel, with no jumps, no projectiles, and a string-based combo system in keeping with 3-D fighting norms. The graphics, too, were more realistic than cartoony, with a muted color palette and naturalistic proportions. We'll have to get more time in on Samurai Sen when it's released this Spring, but as it stands it makes for a fine counterpoint to SFIV.

SNK was also showing an enhanced re-release of the best-received King of Fighters of all time, **The King of Fighters '98 Ultimate Match**, but the big news was the first footage shown anywhere of the oft-delayed, high-def, fully hand-drawn **The King of Fighters XII.** Merely 30 seconds of gameplay were shown, but it was absolutely gorgeous. For everyone who felt betrayed by Street Fighter's transition to 3-D, KoFXII is your game: Lovely high-res sprites with a color palette comparable to SFIII's, though perhaps not as many frames of animation. No new characters could be glimpsed in the snippet of footage shown, but old stalwarts Kyo, Terry and Kim have *never* looked so good. KoFXII won't be out until the tail-end of the year, but just knowing it's coming makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside.

FATE/UNLIMITED CODES

SENGOKU BASARA X

KING OF FIGHTERS XIII

SAMURAI SPIRITS SEN

THE KING OF FIGHTERS '98 ULTIMATE MATCH

Square Enix

You know the arcade market must be healthy if whopping console third party *Square Enix* wants a piece of the action. Arcade trading card games have been all the rage in Japan these past few years, and S-E seeks to put their own RPG-esque spin on the genre with **Lord of Vermilion**. The game is played somewhat like a realtime Eye of Judgment with a much vaster playing field and extensive RTS elements using physical cards, which S-E has drawn on its large stable of name artists like Yoshitaka Amano and Tetsuya Nomura to supply illustrations for. Lord of Vermilion was fascinatingly unique, and with a soundtrack by none other than Final Fantasy maestro Nobuo Uematsu, it's clear S-E means business in the arcades. Perhaps a PS3 port using the PlayStation Eye is (ahem) in the cards.

LORD OF VERMILLION

Card by Yoshitaka Amano (Final Fantasy I-XIII)

Card by Akihiko Yoshida (Final Fantasy XII, Final Fantasy Tactics)

Card by Hideo Minaba (Final Fantasy XII, Final Fantasy Tactics, Lost Odyssey)

Card by Yusuke Naora (Final Fantasy VII-X, Unlimited Sa•Ga, Last Remnant)

Namco Bandai

Having just released Tekken 6 to much acclaim, Namco Bandai laid comparatively low this AOU, but still managed to make an impression. Although the lack of an arcade version of Soulcalibur IV was somewhat surprising, the company had Gundam fans in paroxysms with **Gundam VS. Gundam**, a 4-player fighting game ghost-developed internally at Capcom. G VS. G throws together nearly every Gundam show ever made, for a total of 33 Mobile Suits spanning 15 series. Also on display were a trio of racing games, Namco's stock in trade–**Ace Driver 3 Final Turn** and **Wangan Midnight 3 Maximum Tune** representing the latest entries in those franchises, along with Hanna-Barbera-licensed **Wacky Racers** in a groovedelic retro-futuristic purple cabinet. Finally, Namco Bandai's lineup was rounded out by the umpteenth revision of its cutesy percussion game, **Taiko Drum Master 11**.

GUNDAM VS. GUNDAM

ACE DRIVER 3 FINAL TURN

WANGAN MIDNIGHT 3

Arc Systems Works/AMI

Arc System Works' key offering was of course **BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger**, previewed in last month's issue of **play**. Finally getting to see the game in motion was revelatory for the die-hard 2-D fan: The first hi-def hand drawn fighting game ever was almost painfully beautiful, proving two dimensions can kick ass on next-gen...as long as someone's crazy enough to put in the amount of work it requires. The game felt very much like Arc's Guilty Gear series, though perhaps slightly less frenetic and more strategic, but with only four playable characters it was clear BlazBlue has a while to go before its late 2008 release. Also shown at Arc's booth was **Dodonpachi Daifukkatsu**, shooting champions Cave's latest, reaffirming the relevance of frenzied pellet-dodging.

BLAZBLUE: CALAMITY TRIGGER

AOU 2008

Examu

Newcomer Examu, comprised of many former SNK veterans, made quite a splash last year with the all-girl 2-D fighter Arcana Heart. All it lacked was a wide character roster and quality background graphics, both of which have been remedied in the sequel. **Arcana Heart 2** features seven new battlin' chicks, considerably enhanced special effects, and much more intricate stages, feeling like the game the original always wanted to be. Further announced only on video was **Monster: Ancient Clime**, the third homebrew PC fighting game to be making the jump to arcades after Melty Blood and Akatsuki Blitzkampf.

ARCANA HEART 2

Konami

Konami stuck largely to its bread-and-butter of music games, with updates nobody really needs: **Pop'n Music Party** and **Guitar Freaks V5: Rock to Infinity**. More interesting was an all-new touch-panel based rhythm game, **Jubeat** (the company's first in years), and the seemingly Wii Sports Boxing-inspired **Action Cop**. The Wiimote-esque punchfest has you donning gloves to flail away in space, cracking virtual Yakuza and American gangbanger skulls.

Sega

The big news over at Sega's curiously sparse booth was a 30-second snippet of footage of **Virtua Fighter 5 R**, a VF4 Evo-like incremental upgrade that features an all-new, androgynous, karateka character, as well as the return of giant sumo wrestler Takaarashi (!) from VF3. New stages were also glimpsed, but no other information was forthcoming. On the indie shooter beat, Sega was displaying **Illmatic Envelope** from Milestone (Radilgy and Karas), and **Mamoru-kun Is Cursed!** by G.rev (Senko no Ronde). With both running on Naomi, can Dreamcast ports be far behind...?

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5 R

PRIZES

The theme at AOU this year was very much *video game*, but no Japanese arcade show would be complete without a plethora of samples of the junk you can find inside UFO Catcher machines. Sandwiched among the usual suspects–supercute Post Pet, Gloomy Bear and Dokodemo Issho plushes–was somewhat more interesting fare based on Hollywood films like Speed Racer and Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull. Sadly, the latter was strictly no-photos on the pain of Lucasfilm's lawyers, but take it from us–the life-size translucent crystal alien skull was rad.

Tales of Destiny: Director's Cut

Tales of Triple Dipping

words Casey Loe

Namco-Bandai are packaging this year's North American releases of Tales of Vesperia and Tales of Symphonia: Dawn of the New World as a "10th anniversary celebration" of the Tales series. But the birthday boy didn't get invited to his own party—Tales of Destiny kicked off the series in the U.S., yet its excellent remake will apparently not be localized for the occasion. Playstation-era Tales fans may want to hold their own celebration by importing the collector's edition of Tales of Destiny: Director's Cut, a PS2 remake that comes packed with a Tales music compilation CD and a 128-page hardbound artbook.

The original version of this remake was released in late 2006, and the Director's Cut preserves its many strengths. The town and field graphics are a definite highlight, redone in a beautiful style that transforms the hand-drawn tiles of Tales of Destiny into hand-textured 3D environments. The characters have been redrawn with more realistic proportions and many more frames of animation, the battle system has been revamped and sped up, and several new side quests, skits, and animated cut scenes have been added. As remakes go, it's excellent—if it wasn't for the 2D battle system, dated soundtrack and the somewhat trite story, you might never guess that Tales of Destiny was a decade-old game. In fact, the Tales of Destiny remake is technically superior to Tales of the Abyss in many ways: The overworld map is much nicer, the loading times are nearly nonexistent, and the skits have much more animation. That isn't to say it's anywhere near as good of a game, though. The dialogue in Tales of Destiny may be sharply written, but the story remains straightforward and predictable. The dungeons are confusing due to excessively reused environments, and the remake preserves the random encounters of the original instead of letting you see enemies on the field, as modern Tales games do. But as someone who doesn't hold particularly fond memories for the original Tales of Destiny, I was surprised at how enjoyable of a game the remake turned out to be.

This new "Director's Cut" version is, frankly, just a shameless attempt to cash-in on the original remake's success. There are a few new side quests and some fixes for bugs and balance issues, but the only significant addition is a second mode called "Leon's Side," in which you play through a portion of the game from Leon's perspective. This mode has plenty of new skits and dialogue scenes that reveal the emotions lurking behind Leon's aloof demeanor, but there are no big twists or major revelations, and Leon's Side doesn't feature any new areas or enemies (although it is significantly more challenging). The minor additions are enough to make this the definitive version of Tales of Destiny, but if you already own the original remake, you certainly don't need the Director's Cut.

"The town and field graphics are a definite highlight, redone in a beautiful style..."

Tales of Destiny: Director's Cut — score 7.0

+	High production values, interesting new content
–	Old-fashioned mechanics, weak plot

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Namco-Bandai
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Now (Japan)

This remake has all the mod-cons.

www.playmagazine.com

Warrior Epic

To the hall when adventure calls

words Mike Griffin

Introducing Possibility Space, a new Austin and Beijing-based developer founded by Gage Galinger, Feng Zhu and Jeremy Cook—key members of the Starcraft, Age of Mythology and Gears of War teams. These decorated industry veterans have deep pockets to finance the development of a mighty little action RPG called Warrior Epic. A team of 40 has been quietly toiling away on the game for many months, and Possibility Space fully intends to let anyone play Warrior Epic this summer for a fee of zero dollars.

The goal is polished single-and-multiplayer dungeon campaigns across the Kingdom of Providence, where every player receives his or her own highly-customizable warrior hall to host their friends and hold all their characters and loot, all of it free—with absolutely no gameplay restrictions. What's the catch? We took this question and several more to Possibility Space's community manager, Brice Lucas.

Warrior Epic preview

System(s)	PC
Developer	Possibility Space
Publisher	Possibility Space
Online/Multi	4p co-op, PvP
Available	Summer

INTERVIEW Brice Lucas, Community Manager, Possibility Space

play: Warrior Epic will be free to install and play, with an item shop system to bring in revenue. What kind of items can players buy and how much power do they provide?
Brice Lucas: Our cash shop will be very transparent, prices will be extremely low—like pennies for some items, and most of the items offered will be cosmetic in nature, affecting the appearance of your warriors. At no time will players be forced to pay in order to progress further in Warrior Epic, nor will they be able to purchase power. Some of the items can be purchased at any level; some may be reserved for higher level warriors. Inexpensive buff items will also be available, primarily for convenience. Each mission in Warrior Epic is designed to be roughly 15 minutes long, and the number of buffs you can carry is limited, so they don't unbalance the play.

The character hall concept is going to be a big hit. It's a great evolving reward. So a level 1 hall is going to look like a wood hut compared to a gleaming, treasure-filled level 20 hall?
Your hall will be extremely customizable and will be a direct reflection of how powerful and wealthy of a hall lord you have become. You can deck it out to suit your tastes and show off your exploits. It also functions as a base. When rooms, such as a blacksmith or arcanery, are added, players will benefit from sharper weapons or more effective spells. There will be class specific rooms

as well, such as a target range to buff all of your ranged warriors, or a library to buff all of your students of disciplined magic. Each room will also have several artifacts to increase the number and types of buffs your warriors receive. The hosting player's hall will function as a group's hub prior to embarking on a quest. If the party leader has an insanely decked-out hall, all of the other members of the party will reap the benefits of the added rooms and upgrades.

Admitting friends into one's warrior hall is a neat solution to the player housing feature that so many online gamers request. How many characters can a player keep in their hall?
A concrete warrior limit has not been set. We are considering setting an initial limit of 20 warriors, which could be increased as players upgrade their halls.

The hall will encourage experimentation. Do each of the eight classes—Pit Fighter, Devotess, Archer, Illusionist, Zambrano, Vanisher, Dreadnaught and Pangolin—have levels and abilities to earn in traditional RPG style?
Yes, every single warrior class will be fully featured. Each warrior has its own complete set of unique gear, tailored specifically for the class. The growth and abilities of a warrior are determined using a deep traditional skill tree and player distributed skill points.

Will the control scheme be closer to a Diablo-style point and click, or more like WoW and Guild Wars, using WASD and skill bar?
We are taking the WASD and skill bar approach to controls, although point and click will also be fully supported. This control scheme has proven to be extremely effective and it works well in Warrior Epic.

How many customizable slots do the characters have, and will players visit familiar strategies here, like quaffing health potions, swapping equipment, that sort of thing?
Each warrior will have around a dozen equipment slots. Strategically equipping your warrior prior to battle with specific gear is one of the ways that we are emphasizing team play and battle tactics. Rare and high level equipment is extremely resistant and effective against certain types of enemies. The actual combat and gameplay in Warrior Epic uses a totally different dynamic than what is currently being used in games like WoW or Guild Wars. It would be easier to compare questing in Warrior Epic to a tabletop game. Players must think collaboratively prior to entering a quest. They must consider the environment and choose the best gear and warrior classes to bring along. This is because player resources are limited once in a quest. There is no health or mana recharging, nor is there an infinite supply of consumables to swig.

You have chests and breakables with items, but the best loot usually comes from big, dead monsters. How are drops handled in Warrior Epic?
There are two kinds of drops in Warrior Epic, gold and loot. As gold accumulates, so does a player's XP. Gold and experience is distributed evenly among all party members; this allows an equal amount of credit to be given to healers, casters, buffers, and tanks. Party unity is a huge component to successfully running a quest. Loot quality is determined by the difficulty of the level and boss for rare drops. There will be no ninja looters in Warrior Epic. Players will loot monsters independently from the other members of their party. So if a party defeats a monster that has a 5% chance of dropping an "Axe of Despair", then every player has an independent chance of getting that item.

What happens to missions and enemies when a party increases in size or strength?
One of my favorite aspects of Warrior Epic is how it handles monsters. As players increase in level or parties increase in size, the monster difficulty increases dynamically with them. This works really well in our game because we're not just changing monster names from, like, Green Dragon to Savage Green Dragon, then slapping a new coat of paint on recycled models.

Quests will be dynamically populated with completely different breeds of monsters as warriors level up. Of course bigger parties and stronger warriors mean tougher beasts, which will yield better XP and loot.

What sort of narrative are you telling in the different quest modes?
We are using some very creative writing in the implementation of our mission models. There are two quest modes in the game: Campaign Mode and Adventure Mode. Adventure Mode consists of short, single instance quests. These Adventure Mode quests deviate from the primary campaign story and function as a great way to get experience and level-up. Campaign Mode involves players reclaiming an ancient empire in the main story of Warrior Epic. Quests in the campaign mode are broken up into 15-20 minute instances, which are strung together to tell a single story. There will be sub-objectives in Warrior Epic which will earn players special badges and other rewards. Major class-specific objectives will also exist in the game. When these goals are completed, special skill points will be awarded which will give the warrior access to unique abilities.

How easy is it to find players, communicate and most importantly, ignore morons?
Aside from being able to easily contact and interact with other players and create friends lists in Warrior Epic, we are also putting measures in place that will completely inhibit in-game spamming by giving users total control over how much or how little they are exposed to in chat rooms and private messaging.

Where is PvP going to take place in Warrior Epic, and what sort of incentives will you have to inspire PvP activity?
Like the quests, PvP will be instanced. The PvP mode will have a ranking system, special gear, and hall upgrades that are otherwise unobtainable in other aspects of the game. There will definitely be leader boards on the website, as well as the game's Toughest Warrior, which will be featured on the front page. The PvP mode is fully realized and serves as the perfect complement to the PvE portion of Warrior Epic.

Warrior Epic is clearly designed to accommodate a wide range of computer specs. Do you have settings in there for high image quality in big widescreen resolutions?
Yes, and it looks amazing on a high-res widescreen display. We have built the game from the ground up to run smoothly and look great on older computers, but people with a fast system will certainly benefit by being able to crank up many of the settings.

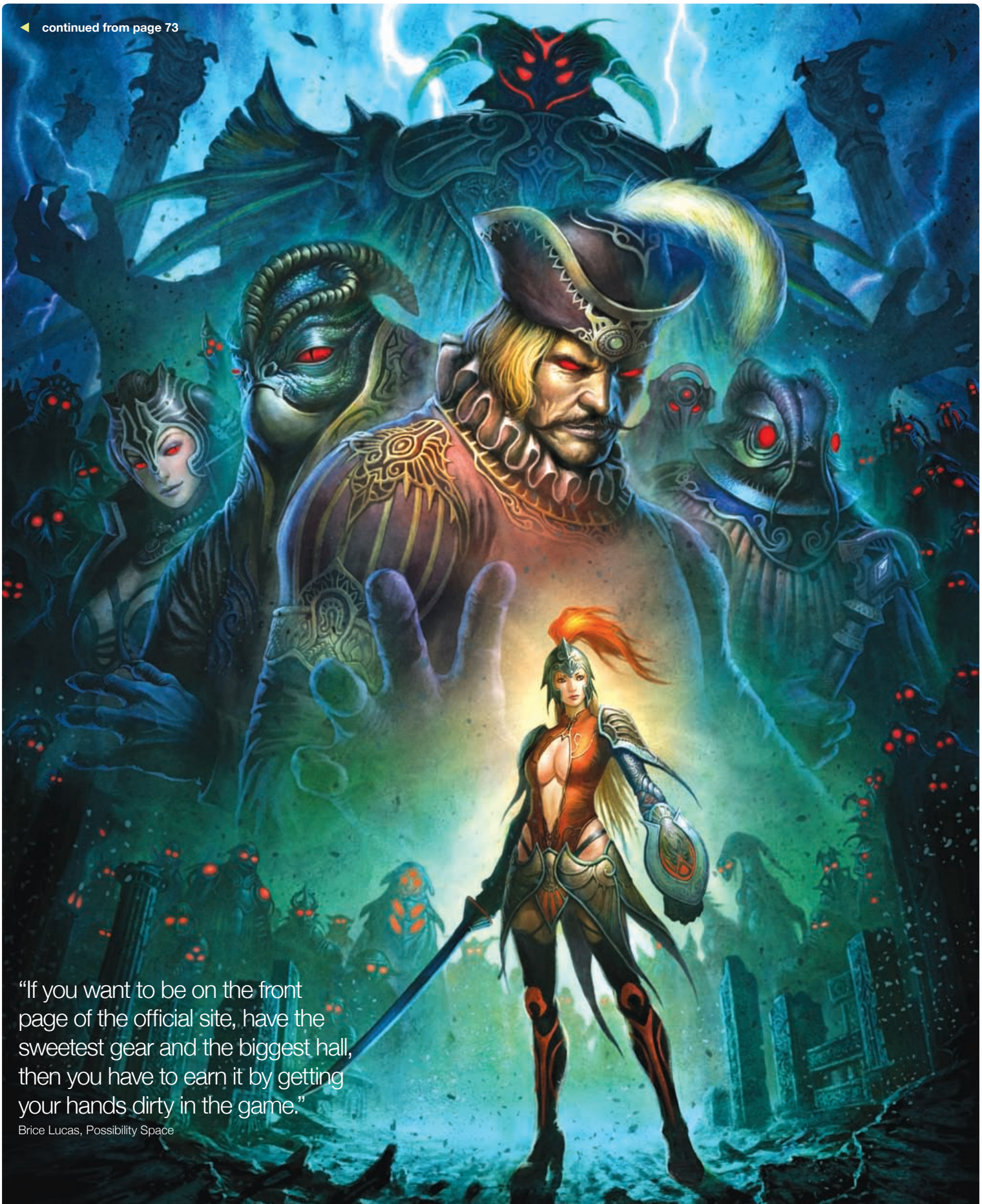
When are you hoping to release the game, and where will servers be located?
Servers will be strategically positioned all over the world. The launch will be global and all countries will have access to our game the day it goes live. No official date has been set for the launch of Warrior Epic, but we're aiming for mid '08.

> "The player's hall is an integral part of the gameplay in Warrior Epic. It will be used to track progress, house warriors, hold loot, and offer new bonuses..."
>
> Brice Lucas, Possibility Space

Any plans for a flat monthly rate? For example, players could pay five dollars a month for larger halls, a chunk of item shop currency—that sort of thing.
We are still considering our billing options, but must stress that Warrior Epic will be truly free to play. There will be no progress locks that require payment or subscription commitments in order to advance. If you want to be on the front page of the official site, have the sweetest gear and the biggest hall, then you have to earn it by getting your hands dirty in the game.

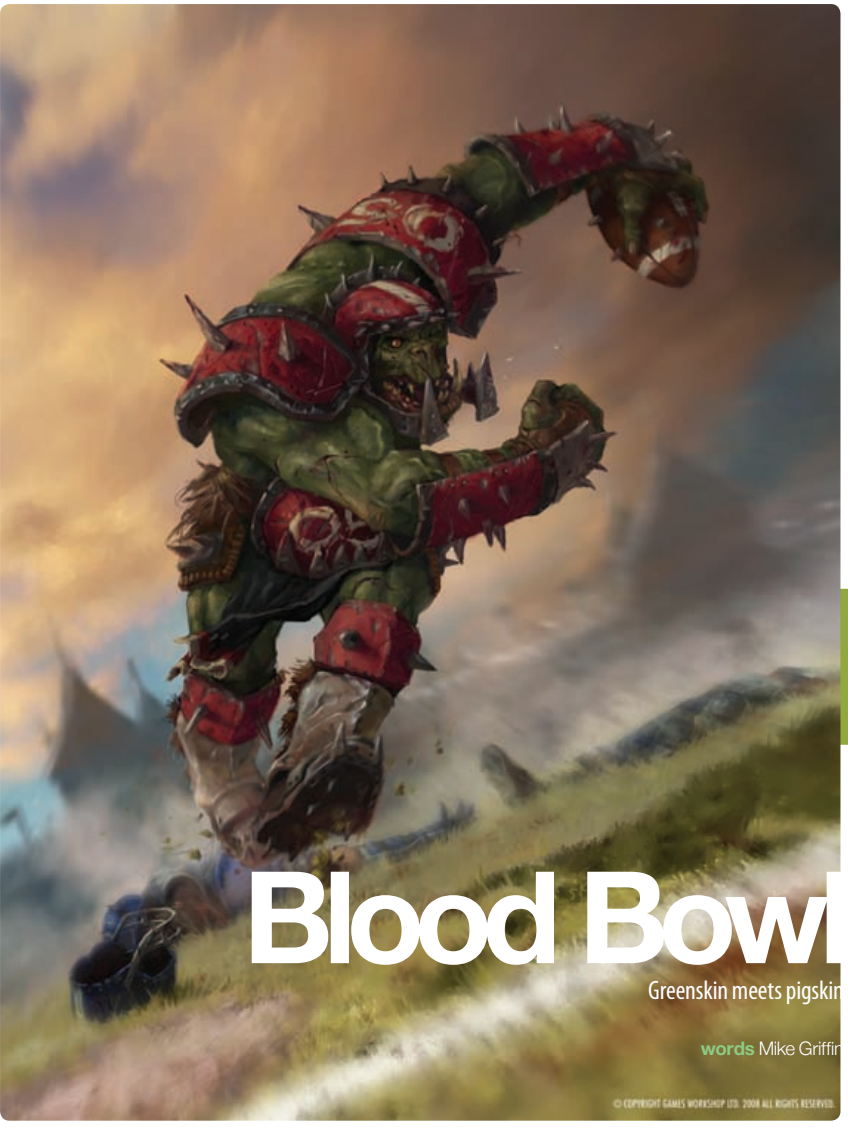
Our thanks to Brice and Possibility Space for the interview. A final note regarding the developer's execution of character death: If one of your many warriors bites it, you can choose to either resurrect them back at your hall to use in the next quest, or you can instantly fuse the fallen warrior's spirit to any living party member for a huge special attack. Choosing the latter will remove that warrior from your line-up forever, but the sacrificial boost might save the day in a boss fight. Good stuff!

◀ continued from page 73



"If you want to be on the front page of the official site, have the sweetest gear and the biggest hall, then you have to earn it by getting your hands dirty in the game."

Brice Lucas, Possibility Space



Blood Bowl

Greenskin meets pigskin

words Mike Griffin

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"Why pass to a goblin wide receiver when you can strap him to the ball and send both screaming into the end zone?"

The lads at Cyanide had an amusing tale regarding Blood Bowl's origins. The French developer gained a cult following for Chaos League, its previous extreme fantasy football series. These titles bore an uncanny resemblance to the characters and gameplay of the Warhammer-inspired Blood Bowl table top games. Games Workshop, ever the vigilant guardian of its intellectual property, took the issue to Cyanide. As it turns out, the two companies share a singular vision of the field when it comes to medieval gridiron. A potential cease and desist turned into a flourishing partnership, and Blood Bowl the video game was born—coming to PC, 360, PSP and DS this fall.

My time at Cyanide was spent with the PC version of Blood Bowl, which shares most of its code with the Xbox 360 edition. If your game is more Mutant League than Madden, Blood Bowl should have an immediate appeal. If you're also into Warhammer fantasy, this game is virtually an obligatory purchase. All your favorites are here: Humans, Orcs, Goblins, Chaos, Elves, Dwarves, Skaven and Lizardmen. All the in-game world maps are 100% Warhammer-true, so every stadium is in a familiar region. Each race also has famous Champion players across many teams; grizzled war vets like the dwarves' devastating lineman Grim Ironjaw, or Varag Ghoul-Chewer, the brutal Black Orc quarterback.

Blood Bowl can be played as either a real-time Madden-like experience, or a slower, turn-based game that closely approximates its tabletop roots. It's a refreshing idea with great potential in multiplayer, where several audiences can be served. You can even change game type from one round to the next to determine who rules at any speed. No matter how you play, your roster stays persistent. Every unit on your team has RPG-like stats, abilities and item slots that get carried over to the next match, provided they survive. From gaining levels and training moves, to deluxe shoulderpads, trophies and hot cheerleaders, this is deep team management fused with addictive character building and item collection.

In-game, I witnessed a dwarven running back slotted with the Sure Hands ability, allowing him a free recovery attempt on a dropped ball. Unfortunately he ran into an orc equipped with a steam-powered chainsaw. Why pass to a goblin wide receiver when you can strap him to the ball and send both screaming into the end zone? Meanwhile, all manner of tomfoolery unfolds on the sidelines: dancing Bloodweiser Babes, apothecaries and mercenaries for hire, bribery and bored orcs wrestling each other. Like the finest Games Workshop properties, Blood Bowl exudes a grim comedy within its fierce violence. Cyanide seems to celebrate the lunacy at every opportunity. As co-designer Regis Robin illustrates ("Even menus will have amusing interaction!"), tiny goblins are mercilessly flicked across a seemingly innocuous set-up screen.

The creation of an eccentric extreme football game seems to be well in hand for Cyanide. The challenge ahead will be Blood Bowl's multiplayer modes. The developer has extremely ambitious plans for league play. Imagine testing the mettle of your fully-customized team, perhaps a veteran crew that you've raised for weeks, in a huge weekend tournament with real prizes. In any case, it's a full plate this summer for Games Workshop fans: you'll be raiding Chaos fortresses by day in Warhammer Online, and stomping the Riekland Reavers at night in Blood Bowl!

Players and venues from the Warhammer world.

"…the architecture of the Xbox 360 is brilliant and makes a lot of things much easier with great results."
Hans-Arno Wegner, Creative Director

Sacred 2: Fallen Angel

When T-Energy runs wild

words Mike Griffin

Since our last Sacred 2: Fallen Angel update, many elements of Ascaron's action RPG have coalesced. CDV is now onboard as US publisher, a big step for the firm as it's their first next-gen console title. The PC version will enjoy an eight player co-op campaign while its Xbox 360 brethren is committed to four-player co-op—both with drop-in, hot seat gameplay. Sacred 2's massive hand-drawn overworld has been finalized at 22 seamless square miles; crossing Ancaria would take hours on foot, hence the customizable battle mounts. NPCs have been given larger brains; between work, play and prayers, they react to players' alignment, time of day, and the game's impressive weather.

Sacred 2's selectable characters—the Seraphim, Inquisitor, Shadow Warrior, High Elf, Dryad and Temple Guardian—are almost finalized, and as you slay creatures through hundreds of quests in the Light and Shadow campaign, the game will dynamically adjust the amount of gore you produce (that's right, there's a Gore System) depending on your character's particular mélange of damage output. We had an opportunity to chat with Ascaron's Creative Director Hans-Arno Wegner about Sacred 2's ongoing design.

Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	preview
System(s)	PC, Xbox 360
Developer	Ascaron Entertainment
Publisher	CDV USA
Online/Multi	8p Co-op, 16p PvP
Available	September

INTERVIEW Hans-Arno Wegner, Creative Director

play: A lot of action RPG players skim through quest narrative. You can't blame them; there's plenty of forgettable quest design in the genre. Why will these Accept button addicts pay attention in Sacred 2?
Hans-Arno: We put a lot of work into the quest design. There are lots of unusual quests with funny dialogue, innuendoes and homages, creating a unique atmosphere. Accept button junkies will always have the feeling that they might have missed something. Fact is, the story of Sacred 2 is deep enough to satisfy the RPG community. This is an interesting and plausible plot with lots of twists, fractions and conflicts. Veteran writer Bob Bates has done a fantastic job creating a storyline that describes each character's development. And don't forget, Ancaria is a living world. There are NPCs walking around, chatting with each other and to you. The player is part of the world, not a superhero cruising through a sterile playground full of supernumeraries.

Action RPGs like Diablo 2 have introduced some great skill trees that users love to experiment with. What's in store for Sacred 2 players?
A unique freedom when developing their character. Each of our six characters has three Aspects of combat arts: fighting, technical and magic. Each Aspect represents a unique play style specially designed for that character. All combat arts within an Aspect can be modified individually, then freely combined with the other facets. This offers an immense amount of individual gameplay styles for each character. Take the Shadow Warrior, for example: he can be played as a tank, or a more agile fighter, or even a kind of necromancer—and possibly a clever combination of the three. Each character differs completely from the other. The Inquisitor can be a cruel fighter, a mage, or a Curse necromancer, and has some of the darkest spells in the game. A Dryad, however, can fight at a distance, beguile enemies or use Nature spells to attack. Every type of player will find a perfect Sacred 2 character build for his preferences. Each character can also use the miracles of a chosen god, completely independent of his class.

A lot of potential in your class design; you're going to see plenty of rowdy character discussions in the forums. How is the console port going—tough to get that slick DX9 code onto the 360? What HD res are you aiming for?
The porting of the DX9 code to Xbox360 was surprisingly easy. For sure, we have to deal with less memory, but the architecture of the Xbox 360 is brilliant and makes a lot of things much easier with great results. Because of the massive amount of action and high-resolution graphics we have in the game, we're supporting 720p as we like to prevent any performance issues.

The first Sacred was loaded with peculiar easter eggs to find. Can players expect more hidden oddities in Sacred 2?
Oh yes, you will find fun gimmicks… such as amusing gravestone inscriptions, which were among the most popular features of Sacred 1. Did you know there were entire websites dedicated to those gravestones? And of course, players will find loads of other types of easter eggs in Sacred 2.

Thanks for the update, Hans.

An Oblivion-sized world to pillage.

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Real Games, Real Gamers, Real Money
REAL COMPETITION

More tactics for Legends of Norrath

Quickly becoming one of the most popular virtual trading card games online, SOE's Legends of Norrath will follow previous chapters *Oathbound* and *Forsworn* with a third instalment, *Inquisitor*, set to purge heresy in March. *Inquisitor* adds over 250 new cards to LoN's impressive deck, each exquisitely hand drawn by top artists like Derek Herring. Loaded with new units, quests and cooperative scenarios, *Inquisitor* also includes over twenty loot items that can be claimed by EverQuest or EQ2 characters.

March will also see the Championship qualifying events for Legends of Norrath. First place qualifiers earn a cool $500 cash prize and a paid trip to the LoN finals at this year's Gen Con in Indy, where they'll have an all-access pass to four days of glory.

"Inquisitor adds over 250 new cards to LoN's impressive deck..."

Quake Live: Free or die hard

IGA Worldwide and id Software have teamed-up to produce Quake Live, the forthcoming free-to-play renaissance of Quake 3 Arena. Will it be classic maps or remixes for the return of this beloved competitive shooter? id Software's executive producer Marty Stratton told Play: "Every arena in the game has, at a minimum, had all of the lighting re-worked and updated using a newer lighting model. Several arenas have been completely re-textured, some arenas have had slight changes to architecture, flow or item placements, and some arenas have had very significant re-design work done. We've looked at what's been popular over the years, what the pro community has done to some of the original maps."

The Quake Live web client is tuned to run at 60 FPS on almost any PC from the last five years and the built-in matchmaking and prize tournaments won't cost a dime, as IGA's ad-support pays the bills. Keep an eye on the Play website for our complete Quake Live interview with Marty Stratton and IGA Worldwide CEO Justin Townsend.

Re-live Quake 3's inimitable speed and precision.

ask alienware

no. 021 // april 2008

In this installment we welcome spring with queries ranging from new drive technology, to Vista service packs, how much protection your PC needs to fend off external threats, shopping smart for gaming LCDs, and our take on Nvidia's acquisition of Ageia.

q. Solid state hard drives seem to be on the rise, but the costs are still too prohibitive for me. Flash memory card prices keep dropping, but these solid state hard drives remain incredibly expensive (for 100+ GB drives anyway). Are solid state drives a perfect match for gaming like I hope, or is there a major drawback? They must rock for game engines like WoW that seamlessly load off the hard drive.
Jav. CA.

Alienware: Their increased speeds make solid state hard drives perfect for loading game engines such as WoW, and you should also see improvements in the game when loading maps and other game elements. While solid state drives can be cost prohibitive now, you will see prices come down as the technology becomes more mature. As we saw with the transition from IDE drives to SATA drives, with SATA becoming not only more refined but more prevalent and therefore more affordable, we will see the same transition with solid state drives as prices fall to more mainstream levels and capacity increases.

q. Do you know what kind of big features and changes will be in the first service pack for Windows Vista? I think it's coming before summer. I may finally upgrade if it's a good one.
Philip, WA.

Windows Vista SP1

Alienware: Vista Service Pack 1 will improve Windows quality by delivering application and device driver improvements as well as further updates. Some of the new features of Windows Vista SP1 include performance enhancements such as more efficient memory usage during idle speeds and faster load times for accessing and opening applications. Also, expect to see some new Windows gadgets. Windows Vista Ultimate users will have an opportunity to download exclusive Ultimate items such as Ultimate Vista dreamscapes. As with previous Windows service packs, plan on enhanced usability and functionality.

q. I don't like firewall and virus programs cluttering up my taskbar, running checks all the time, asking for permission for everything. I'd rather rely on a hardware firewall. How much protection do I get if my connection to the internet is behind both a router and a VOIP modem? I figure with two hardware firewalls between one's PC and the internet, you can turn off all that software junk...
Will, TX.

AVG Anti-Virus

Alienware: Hardware solutions that carry a firewall such as routers or switches will offer you sufficient protection from malicious hackers trying to access your network. If you are running two hardware firewalls, you have a very effective solution to keep hackers out. But what you have neglected are internet-based viruses. Virus protection software programs protect against both external hackers and internal viruses. Without that added layer of security, just signing onto the internet can expose you to any number of malicious programs that can be very difficult to remove. We suggest using both a hardware firewall and a non-intrusive virus protection program such as AVG to keep your system secure from both threats.

q. I need a new LCD monitor and the 1080p 24-inch range looks ideal for desktop. Nice and big, not too desk hogging. After looking at a few brands, it surprised me how wide the price spectrum is, going from around $500 to over $1000! What features are essential on a good gaming LCD display these days? I have a brand new GeForce 8800 GT to pair it with.
Dave, QC.

Alienware: The number one, most important feature for a good gaming LCD is the response time. The lower the response time on your computer, the faster you can display and refresh signals sent from your computer and the better off you are. With low response times, you won't experience ghosting or have residual imagery on the screen from something like moving your mouse side to side. Response rates are measured in milliseconds so a lower number tells you it takes less time for your monitor to respond to a signal. The best monitor you can buy right now is a 2 millisecond display and you shouldn't have any difficulties finding that speed in a 24-inch LCD. Overall for a gaming system, you want to stay at 6 milliseconds or lower. Above that and you may notice ghosting.

"…the current PhysX cards will most likely be phased-out and possibly replaced by a hybrid of a lighter physics solution that supports graphics…"

q. You've probably heard the news about NVIDIA buying Ageia. You guys are the hardware experts; do you think this is good news for PC gamers? What does your crystal ball tell you about what these two powerhouses can cook up together? Will older PhysX cards get phased-out?
Paul, MA.

NVIDIA. PhysX by ageia

Alienware: Now that NVIDIA has purchased Ageia, the current PhysX cards will most likely be phased-out and possibly replaced by a hybrid of a lighter physics solution that supports graphics or vice versa. Expect to see the PhysX processing unit mounted onto NVIDIA GPUs. It can either be mounted internally as its own die or it can be mounted directly on top of the GPU die. Additionally, the software developers from both NVIDIA and Ageia will now be producing greater and more complex applications that can leverage NVIDIA drivers. It should be very interesting to watch what comes out of this acquisition.

Please visit us at **www.alienware.com/ask** to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest new products.

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アップルシード Appleseed EX MACHINA

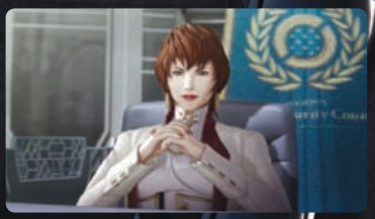
Deunan it right

words Dave Halverson

The first CGI *Appleseed* feature film was a beautiful thing. The combination cel-shaded coating made for a slightly banal presentation, but overall there's no arguing that it was like a breath of fresh Olympus air. Then again, just about anything based on anything created by Shirow Masamune deserves a place in the Smithsonian Institute as far as I'm concerned.

For their second outing, the Ex Machina film partners have truly outdone themselves enlisting the directorial skills of Shinji Aramaki—one of anime's elder statesmen—and the production wizardry of John Woo, Hollywood action master extraordinaire. The result is a CGI bliss-fest that in a perfect world would eclipse half of the trite action rubbish that clogs our nation's multiplexes. The story has all of the telltale signs of a Shirow epic: A shadowy terrorist group bent on abolishing humanity (after they have a little fun with us, of course), a Mobile Suit-infused Special Forces unit bent on their total destruction, and smack dab in the middle of the whole mess that underlying current that underscores nearly everything Shirow touches: where to draw the line between man and machine.

Ex Machina truly has it all. Aramaki and Woo's fingerprints are everywhere you turn, and what an amazing team they make. The mecha is among the best I've ever seen in CGI—a kind of mixture between *Gundress* and *Ghost in the Shell*—and the subtle details that Woo brings transforms the stark overtones that so often render CGI a lifeless medium, creating a film with true emotion at its core. You've never seen Deunan or Briareos like this, and if those names don't mean anything to you, then this would be a good time to join the church of Shirow. Oh, and get this… There's a ton of excellent extras—a rarity for anime CG or otherwise.



"...the subtle details that Woo brings transforms the stark overtones that so often render CGI a lifeless medium..."

Appleseed Ex Machina

Verdict:
A feature length CGI feature with a soul. Science fiction fans will relish John Woo's Midas touch and Shinji Aramaki's gorgeous art...with an actual story. But this one?

Released By	Warner Bros. Home Entertainment/EX
Volume	Movie
Running Time	120 minutes
Rating	PG-13
Available	March

Black Blood Brothers

Have you hugged a vampire today?

words Dave Halverson

Blood: It's what's for dinner.

"This show has it all: great characters, a fresh story, epic battles, and just the right mixture of action, humor and drama."

Welcome to the new face of anime where FUNimation and VIZ reign supreme, followed by Manga Video, Right Stuf, Bandai, Media Blasters, and the usual studio fare from Sony Pictures and Miramax (give or take a few stragglers). ADV and Geneon—a good half of the market—are no longer (ADV's on life support) and so the field is thinning out. While I'm steaming mad that *Sergeant Frog* and *Gurren-Lagann* got caught in the crossfire (they're bound to turn up, though), I can get used to a steady stream of quality shows without all of the annoying filler that has plagued the industry for so long. Case in point: *Black Blood Bros*. Here we have a show that takes an age old tale—vampires vs. humans—and completely reinvents the wheel. Replacing our typical vampiric protagonists we have Kotaro, a young, mischievous boy blood sucker, and his brother Jiro, wielder of the Silver Blade, a sacred sword with mystical powers. All they want is to live in peace in the "Special Zone," the only place on Earth where vampires and humans live together in peace. But the Kowloon Children, along with the many vampire refugees, are making their pilgrimage a living hell. Luckily—well, sort of—a negotiator between the species, Mimiko, is helping smooth the transition, but the Kowloon bloodline is proving a more than worthy adversary. This show has it all: great characters, a fresh story, epic battles, and just the right mixture of action, humor and drama. It's also bloody gorgeous.

Black Blood Brothers
Chapter 1: Bad Tidings

Verdict: A great new series that fuses drama and horror extremely well. A bit more sexuality and additional key cast members and you're looking at a triple-A new franchise. Volume 2 could be the make or break.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	100 lovely minutes
Rating	TV MA
Episodes	4
Available	March

words Bill Gray

Slick. That's the word that came to mind as I watched *Vexille*, Funimation's anime/CGI extravaganza that's currently in limited theatrical release. Slick animation. Slick battles. And a super-slick soundtrack from techno-master Paul Oakenfold. *Vexille* is at its best when it's dazzling you with explosions and CG effects—they compensate for its slightly overblown story and stiff characters.

Reminiscent of *The Animatrix*, *Vexille* depicts a near future where the UN imposes sanctions on Japan because it deems Japan's technological expertise in cybernetics and robotics a threat to humanity. Instead of buckling under UN pressure, Japan deploys an electromagnetic stasis field making the country invisible to satellites and observation. Trade is still permitted, however, and soon Japan's robots, built by Daiwa, dominate the world economy, though no one is permitted to enter or exit the country—no one can even see it.

All that changes when Saito, a Daiwa executive, convenes a secret meeting with the heads of various world powers in attendance. The meeting is spectacularly broken up by a U.S. peacekeeping force known as SWORD, led by Leon and Vexille, a female agent. SWORD's investigation into Daiwa takes Vexille and her teammates into the heart of Japan itself, and the horrifying truth of what they find there.

Fluid, colorful, engaging, *Vexille*'s CG-animation alone is worth the price of your ticket. It's like nothing I've seen before—a mix of hard CGI with backgrounds and machinery, and an almost hand-painted effect on the characters themselves. The overall effect took my breath away, and that was on my little TV at home. It would be mind-blowing to see this on the big screen, with Oakenfold's pulsing techno-soundtrack driving the action in the background. Dubbing-wise, it matches the high quality typical of a Funimation production, though if you watch a lot of Funi titles, you may be able to recognize some of the voice actors.

Of course, voice actors can only work with what they're given, and in *Vexille*'s case, I don't think they had much of a chance to shine. The script and story, possessed of wonderfully exciting big ideas (robotics, nanotechnology, the struggle to define humanity), express them so heavy handedly that they're easy to tune out. It doesn't help that most CGI animators, including *Vexille*'s, still struggle to replicate the range of emotions of the human face, leaving you with clunky dialogue, stiffly delivered. This really hurts the movie—as a friend of mine put it, *Vexille* is "mildly profound."

Still, *Vexille* definitely feels big budget, and its story is Shakespeare compared to some of the drivel you see in typical action movies today. Grab a friend who has never seen anime before, take them to the theater for *Vexille*, and prepare to be dazzled, though maybe not moved.

"Slick. That's the word that came to mind as I watched Vexille..."

Vexille

Verdict:
Glitzy, high-intensity fight scenes and battles compensate nicely for some rough dialogue and wooden facial expressions. Worth the ticket, definitely.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	Movie
Running Time	109 minutes
Rating	PG-13
Available	In theaters now

One Piece

Pure Piratical Pleasure

words Bill Gray

Ahh, I love *One Piece*. The colorful characters. The ridiculous names. And the riotous, madcap action of a series that doesn't take itself too seriously, yet manages to conjure moments of genuine pathos from time to time. And it's about time someone rescued it from the crappiness it's been wallowing in for the past few years, and gave it the gold-plated treatment it deserves. Finally.

That "someone," naturally enough, is Funimation, which has admirably stepped into the void left by Geneon's utter destruction, releasing "serious" titles like *Mushi-shi*, joint ventures like *Witchblade*, and epic episodic TV shows like *One Piece*. The third-best selling manga ever produced by *Weekly Shonen Jump* (which includes *Naruto*), *One Piece* has spawned an anime TV show, nine movies, five North American games, and more action figures, statuettes and other assorted tchotchke than Nami can shake her stick at. For the first 100 episodes or so, though, North American fans of the show had to watch the excruciatingly watered-down version of the show produced by 4Kids and designed specifically to appeal to sugar-buzzed, seven-year-old boys on Saturday mornings.

To earn an appropriate rating, 4Kids had to significantly tone down the show's violence, replacing all of the guns, for example, with pop guns, squirt guns, or even in one memorable example, a "hammer" gun. Cigarettes, cursing and cleavage got the ax too. The ham-handed "retouching" spoiled most of the fun, and what was left got sucked away by the irregular airings. *A shame*, I thought to myself. *One Piece is so much better than Naruto, and yet the way it's been handled killed what could have been a legitimate rival to the orange pantsuit*.

Well, Funimation must have heard my mental cry, because after 4Kids dropped the license, Funi snapped it up and immediately announced that it would re-issue all 104 episodes aired by 4Kids on DVD, only this time uncut, unedited, and with a new dub. What's more, they're making hay out of their license by releasing the *One Piece* movies, starting with *The Princess and the Pirates* reviewed not long ago in this very magazine, as well as announcing plans to produce the remainder of the episodes. Funimation sent us a screener of the first five unedited episodes with the dub in place, and what I've seen shivers me timbers—in a good way.

Gone are the silly edits. Back is the slightly salty dialogue. Missing is the "hammer gun," hopefully for good. And I can finally sit back, relax, and bask in the over-the-top zaniness of a fantastic show that's finally targeted to appeal at who it should have in the first place—sugar-buzzed young men.

"Gone are the silly edits. Back is the slightly salty dialogue."

One Piece

Verdict:
Hide the young children, 'cause One Piece is back, baby. If you've seen previous editions of the show, erase 'em from your brain and replace 'em with these.

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	One
Running Time	125 minutes
Rating	Not yet rated
Episodes	1-4
Available	May 27

COMPLETE SERIES-PART ONE

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gear

words Mike Griffin

Sharp Aquos GP3 LCD (LC-32GP3U)

by Sharp Electronics

We've been test driving Sharp's all-new Aquos GP3 LCD display, a full 1080p (1920 x 1080 resolution) marvel designed and built for gamers. Our 32-inch unit is ideal for game rooms and perfect for apartment and condo dwellers. No details were ignored in the GP3's construction, another impressive design by longtime Sharp collaborator Toshiyuki Kita. The panel itself is state-of-the-art eighth generation glass from Sharp's sophisticated Kameyama 2 plant. Combined with the GP3's four-wavelength backlight, this panel boasts deeper blacks and more vibrant reds than previous generation LCD displays, in addition to a superb 176 degree viewing angle and fast 6ms response time.

We ran the Aquos GP3 through a glorious media marathon, assembling several 1080p games for the Xbox 360 and PS3, some recent 1080p Blu-ray releases (*Across the Universe* and *Michael Clayton*), Crysis through the GP3's handy analog PC input, and broadcast television 1080i HD of The Sarah Connor Chronicles and Lost. The GP3 is a superb multimedia companion. With three HDMI and two component inputs, your consoles and DVR can co-exist. The GP3 also features a Game input with "Vyper Drive"—essentially bypassing redundant processing to reduce any lag between game and display.

The Sharp Aquos GP3 produced outstanding images. Its dot-by-dot view mode tends to resolve 1080i and 1080p remarkably well. Super Stardust HD is lovely in full HD. Viewing Blu-ray films in proper 1080p24, as the GP3 is capable of doing, is an extravagance that everyone should experience. One slightly dubious aspect of the GP3's design is the speaker "stubble" along the bottom of the unit, but this petty cosmetic grievance in silenced by first-rate audio. Get your own GP3 now in black, red or white at all major electronics dealers.

Essential Specs:
Resolution: 1080p (1920 x 1080)
Dynamic contrast: 10 000:1
Response time: 6ms
HD inputs: 5 (HDMI x3, Component x2)
PC input: 1 (15-pin VGA)

Warrior Xxtreme

by WolfKing

Of the many keyboard mutations that WolfKing has offered in recent years, the backlit Warrior Xxtreme is certainly one its most aesthetically pleasing models. WolfKing's latest design is intended to be a 2-in-1 gamepad and keyboard, a concept it claims to have tested extensively with players and teams from around the globe. Research that led to the Warrior Xxtreme's dual disc layout: the left "gamepad" disc contains an optimal arrangement of key shapes and positions for MMORPGs and first-person shooters, while the right half of the Warrior Xxtreme provides a compacted QWERTY pad—one that you'll have to wrap your brain around. The Warrior Xxtreme is feature-starved compared to programmable monsters like the Logitech G-15 and Razer Tarantula, and its use as a fast single-handed typing device is debatable, but if you really enjoy the fine left disc ergonomics it could be worth overcoming the learning curve.

Essential specs:
Headphones
Freq. response: 18 – 22,000 Hz
Impedance: 32 Ohms
SPL (@ 1 kHz, 1 Vrms): 114 dB
Cable: 3.0 meters

Microphone
Freq. response: 80 – 15,000 Hz
Sensitivity (@ 1 kHz, 1V/Pa): -38 dB
Impedance: Approx. 2 kOhms
Pick-up: Uni-directional

Piranha Gaming Communicator

The last Razer headset we tried, the Barracuda HP-1, totally delivered on its 5.1 surround promise, however it but proved quite average in terms of overall sound quality and comfort. Razer's newest headset is the Piranha Gaming Communicator and we're happy to report that this device is well-rounded. While it's not going to massage and thrill your noggin like a pair of Sennheiser 555s, the Piranha produces rich bass, accurate highs and lows, and the soft over-ear pads will have you gaming for hours without headphone ear fatigue. The Piranha is driverless, works with pretty much any OS, and functions perfectly in Ventrillo, Teamspeak and internet telephony programs like Skype. The mic's pick-up range is dead-on. It also works like a charm in all Steam games, so you can beg your engineers for a dispenser in Team Fortress 2 and they'll actually hear you this time.

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No Country For Old Men

Movie: A+ Extras: NA

Directed by: Ethan and Joel Coen
Starring: Tommy Lee Jones, Josh Brolin, Javier Bardem
Released By: Miramax
Rated: R

The best year for movies in a decade may have also produced one of the best movies in the modern era, and this in a year when the likes of *There Will Be Blood* and *Into The Wild* fought for arthouse supremacy. I loved this movie, every single menacing, gorgeous frame.

No Country For Old Men collects a group of fantastic performances, and at the center is the frightening Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a ruthless, psychopathic killer whose weapon of choice is a crude cattle execution device, which uses a can of compressed air to silently drive a hammer through the skulls of its victims. Why this man kills is never quite clear, whether for the pure pleasure, out of necessity, some bent code of honor. Or just out of pure evil; he drives by a crow on a bridge and feels the need to blast it dead, simply because it was there and it seemed sensible at the time. When a scene captures death, it is awful and poignant, powered home by the weight of Anton's frigid presence. *No Country For Old Men* is a triumph of style and razor-sharp storytelling.

If Anton is nothing more than a soulless bringer of death, it is this brand of lifeless decay that is indeed part of a country no longer fit for old men, old wisdom. The way of the world is cruel, pointless and random, and watching as the greek chorus, as a god figure who seems content to watch the gears turn from a safe distance, is Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones). Bell seems like a good man, resolved to live a good life he doesn't quite want to understand, perhaps because to understand is to give into the nihilistic gravity the film ferociously spins.

No Country For Old Men is not afraid to be exciting and humorous in crowd-pleasing ways beneath its arthouse intentions, even when the darkness is setting on the screen and about to suffocate us. The story of drugs and a decent everyday man on the run, corrupted by the chance for a new life, is classic entertainment, but the masterful Coens direct this adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's equally gripping novel with a complex truth that bites. Should the ending have brought more closure? No way. The simple yet profound stage in *No Country For Old Men* has no room for a measurable Hollywood ending. **Brady Fiechter**

"When a scene captures death, it is awful and poignant..."

Bad will hunting...

The Mist

Movie: B- Extras: NA

Directed by: Frank Darabont
Starring: Thomas Jane, Marcia Gay Harden
Released By: The Weinstein Company
Rated: R

Something *evil* is lurking in the fog. It looks like it crawled out from the ocean, made love with an alien, somehow spliced in spider DNA, and then decided to feast on a motley group of shoppers in a grocery store in small-town Maine. Even more menacing than the creatures encroaching from the mist outside are the agitated, questioning, alliance-forming humans inside, who grapple with religious and racial tension, right wing conspiracy and the culture of fear. Director Frank Darabont, far removed from the greatness he exhibited in the also-Steven-King-adapted *Shawshank Redemption*, starts out with more B-movie trimmings before falling into manic proselytizing. The madness that flares between the crazy and the sane, the gods and the monsters, would have been more compelling if toned down a degree or two, but the moody fun that drives them all bonkers is more than enough to push *The Mist* engagingly to its almost evil climax. Walking out of *The Mist* in the theater, I heard more than enough comments: "that's fu**ed up." Yes, great ending indeed. **Brady Fiechter**

Them

Movie: C+ Extras: NA

Director by: Xavier Palud, David Moreau
Starring: Olivia Bonamy, Michael Cohen
Released By: Dark Sky Films
Rated: R

Torture porn, or whatever you want to call the vile and vicious *Saw*s and *Hostel*s of the world, is losing its shock-value charm. There's a generous part of me that is more than willing to go in for the tasteless garbage that passes for horror movies these days, but the satisfaction of psychological chills of the more unseen kind is the only way to crawl under your skin and do some damage. This French horror film of modest intentions is fairly tame beside the last few years of teen TP, and that alone establishes a mood of anticipation for the shocking payoff that may—or may not—even come. *Them* makes the mistake of reaching to deeply into the grab bag of jolt cliches—creepy static TV, creepy voice on the other line—but that's not to say the bad guy (guys?) doesn't manage to provide the occasional viewer distress as we reluctantly watch a good-looking couple run around their far-too-secluded-and-perfectly-haunted-house-like house, screaming for their lives. The film is arbitrary in its plotting, offering little more than its mood and sharp direction to replace a story with hide-and-seek scare tactics. *Them* is based on a "true story"; if you can tolerate the absurd ending and disregard any logic before it, this small film is at least something the genre needs more of. **Brady Fiechter**

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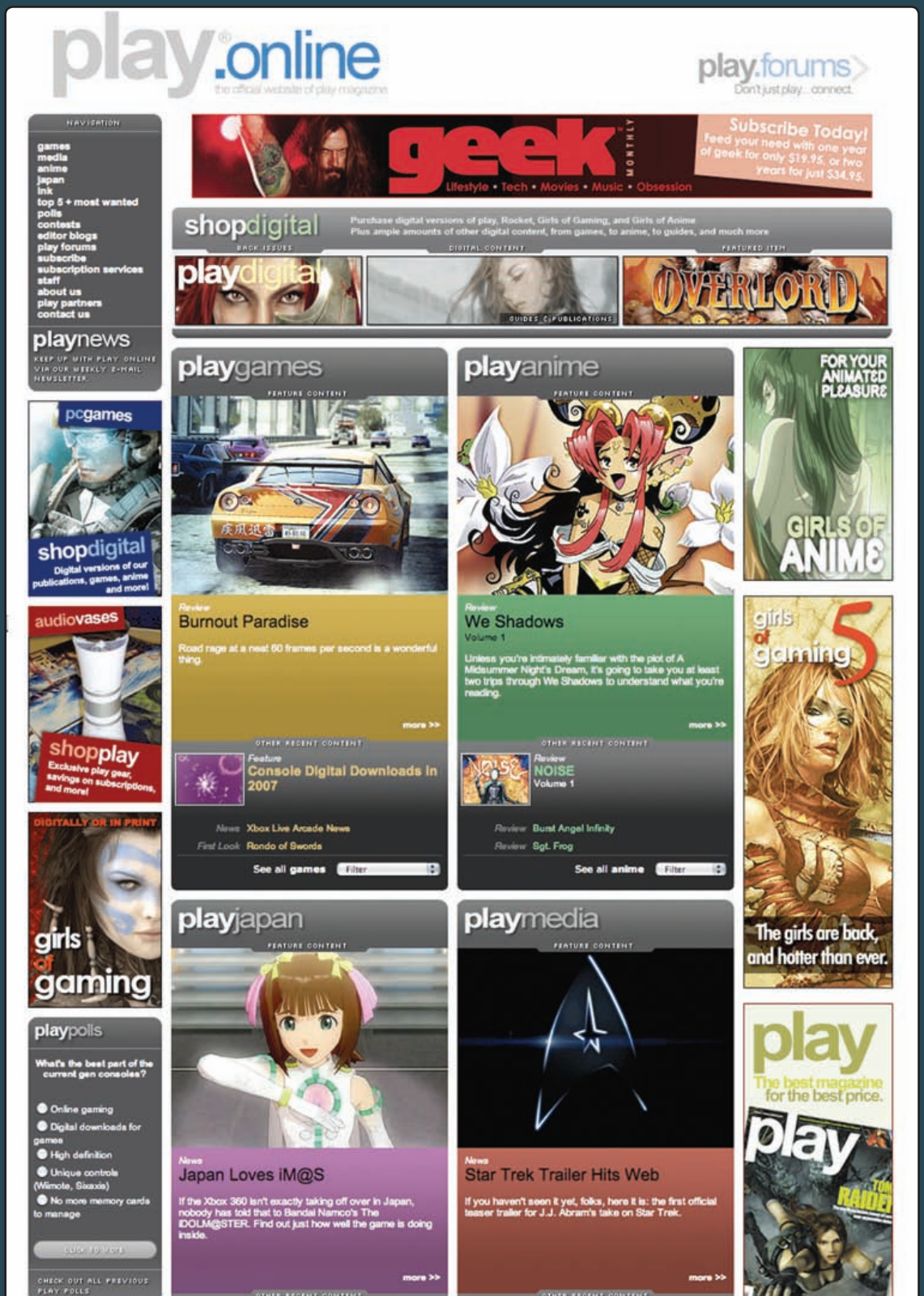

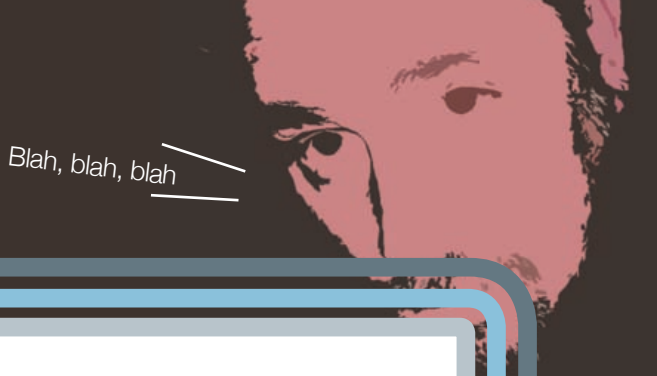

04_08 DAVE HALVERSON
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

We're so biased...

We're often indicted as being biased. When we heralded the Xbox as it began to outperform the PS2 with games like Fable, The Chronicles of Riddick and Halo, we were deemed Microsoft fanboys (and I hear you can go to hell for that). When we heaped praise on Metroid Prime, Windwaker, Super Mario Sunshine, Wario World, Eternal Darkness and Starfox Adventures, we were accused of drinking the GameCube Kool-Aid, and more recently, post our Q4 PS3 run, including MotorStorm, Resistance, Heavenly Sword, Eye of Judgment, Uncharted, and Ratchet and Clank—we've been indicted as PS3 zealots… Just as we were back when we got behind the 360… Dirty flip-floppers! That's what we are!

The fact of the matter is that we're constantly experiencing and/or expounding bias in one form or another in this industry. It's the nature of the beast... It's also all in the presentation. Bias as prejudice, for instance, is an antagonistic disposition, however, a predilection, partiality, or proclivity is only natural when faced with new information or a superior product. Is my wife biased because she chose a Japanese crossover over a US one? No; that's called an educated decision (and self preservation—gotta protect the clan). The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that bias, for lack of a better word, is good. Bias is right; bias works. Bias clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Bias, in all of its forms—bias for better graphics, for higher resolution, for Blu-ray—has marked the upward surge of mankind and bias, you mark my words, will not only save gaming but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.

If you're not "biased" towards the PS3's technology, for instance, you're simply not aware of the facts. That doesn't mean you have to get a PS3 tattoo or peel the "have you hugged your Xbox 360 today" bumper sticker off your Geo Metro, it's just what "is" is. Maybe you think the 360 has better games, as some of us do. It's all a matter of opinion…another form of bias; the bias that literally shapes our industry. When the press and public react to a given trend or technology, the publishers listen. Our bias (and yours) has a direct effect on what we all end up playing. It's the essence of the "console wars." The reason certain games that would be better off on 360 and PS3 are getting made on Wii, and that there are so few third-party PS3 exclusives (for now), is because Nintendo has the numbers and the 360 is (or was) outselling the PS3.

Knowing full well that it's only a matter of time before pricing levels out, Nintendo has developed a firm grasp on families and younger players—people biased towards the Wii, as they should be. Elsewhere the burgeoning mature demographic have their own choices to make. The PS3 doubles as a Blu-ray player and the tech to go the distance along with a rock-solid first-party base, while Microsoft has the edge on community, and a first-party army of its own including Gears of War and Fable—two of the most powerful names in gaming. If you can't own both (sell the dog), you have to pick a side. Does that make you biased? Yup.

"Only a fool makes a choice based on residual emotion or idealism. One need only turn on the evening news to see where that leads."

You fanboy! Look at the PSP versus the DS. The PSP has the 3D power but the DS is king of the castle (must be the chair). At the end of the day it's all about the games or the price or both…but mainly it's about bias.

Only a fool makes a choice based on residual emotion or idealism. One need only turn on the evening news to see where that leads. And so members of the jury I openly admit it: yes, I'm biased. Right now I'm biased towards the Wii for platforming, 360 for first-person adventure and PS3 for adventure. In fact, I've recently flip-flopped from a Wii scoffer to a Wii lover. When presented with new facts or information changing one's mind is the right thing to do, but you know what? I just love great games.

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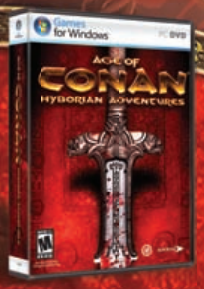

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